転生王子はダラけたい 10

あざの耕平

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BEGINS/TEMPLE

ファンタジア文庫

東京イヴィズ
10
SINS
BEGINS/TEMPLE
「蝕っていいですか？」
「うえっ!?」

Chapter 1 - Rabbit from the Temple of Darkness

"I believe that the essence of sorcery is what are called 'lies'."

"But isn't 'truth' sometimes more of a falsehood than lies?"

--Tsuchimikado Harutora

Part 1

This occurred many nights earlier--

That altar was on the roof of a building.

Torii were erected on the four sides of a platform constructed from stone. The north torii was black, the east torii was blue, the south torii was red, and the west torii was white.

The platform had already been assembled on many pedestals, arrayed with a multitude of offerings. Silver coins, white silk, a paper horse, a paper soldier[1], full armor, bow and arrows, a long sword, cloisonné enamel[2], gold, a koto[3], a lute. There were also many vessels made from paper that were carefully infused with magical energy by the one managing the platform. Next to them were also ritual tools - a taiko drum, a conch[4], sleigh bells, a hei[5], incense, a hand bell, a vodoo doll[6] and charms.

The ritual had already been prepared properly. The wind gusted across the top of the roof. The sky slowly brightened and the all encompassing darkness was chased away by the sun. It would be dawn soon. The time when the sun and moon switched places was imminent.

There were five figures on the platform. In the center stood a boy wrapped in a black coat, his left eye covered with a cloth. The hem of his black coat was blown aflutter by the wind.

In front of the boy was a pedestal upon which laid a girl. It was as if she were sleeping, but the uniform on her body was soaked in blood. The wind gently brushed against the girl, and the pink ribbon tying the girl's long black hair swayed softly with the wind.

Behind the boy and the girl were two figures watching everything. One was a woman with animalistic ears and a tail, and the other was a man with only one arm. The two stayed like this without saying anything, quietly waiting for the coming of that time.

The final person was a small girl who had prepared the ritual while waiting for them. Her expression was cold as she stared at the attentive boy.

The boy was looking around with his remaining right eye in order to check the altar. The girl waited for the boy to finish his inspection, then walked towards the boy, giving him a sheet of paper that had been folded multiple times. This was the script for the ritual oration.

The boy received the script and held it against his chest for a moment, closing his eyes. After a while, he nodded to the girl. After the girl grabbed a hammer, she struck the taiko. Boom-- Boom-- Boom-- Boom-- Boom-- Boom--, she struck it six times. Then, she took the conch and blew it. The sound contained magical energy and it gradually permeated the dawn air, but the last note echoed throughout the area several times.

The two figures watching everything from behind turned their bodies slightly.

The black coat wrapped around the boy swelled as if it were breathing. The boy held the script before himself and loudly chanted the incantation.

"The Tsuchimikado Onmyoudou sect would like to address Taizan Fukun, the lord of the underworld--"

...That happened many nights ago.

The wheel of fate that transcended time accelerated.

Part 2

The wind blowing towards the mountain woods intensified the chill of winter. The girl's small body couldn't help but shiver, so she brought the bamboo broom to her chest, rubbing her hands together. The mountaintop always felt the coming of winter earlier than at the foot of the mountain. The breath that came from her mouth instantly became faint white mist.

She cast her gaze above her, where the dark sky was covered everywhere by branches. The bright red leaves had begun to fade these few days. Ripened fruit occasionally left the tips of branches, dropping down freely. Thanks to that, she wouldn't be able to sweep it clean no matter how she swept. "Hah--" With that sigh, the girl glared at the fallen maple leaves.

Not long afterwards.

"Akino! Are you still not done!?"

A roar came from a place very far away. The girl named Akino shouted "Yeah--" after she heard that, and in the next moment, the girl's hair seemed to float upwards.

The girl hastily covered her head with her hands, and in exchange the broom fell to the ground. "Ah-- Ah--" She glanced at the fallen broom on the ground, and the ill-fitting glasses on her face also slid down without missing a beat. In the end, Akino quietly wailed "Uuu--" while holding her head with both hands and with her glasses askew. She turned to look in the direction of the roar.

Other than the reddened maple leaves, several ancient huge cedar trees towered around her. An old hall could be seen across the doorpost-like cedar trees. A Buddhist monk frowning as always walked from there, wearing a black priest's robe over an antarvasa kasaya[7]. He was an overweight ajari[8] of this monastery.

"Ah, Priest Tadanori....."

"The others all finished already, you're the only one always dilly-dallying."

"A-Ah..... Sorry....."

Akino thought of fleeing while apologizing in a stammer. Though she apologized, her voice was almost inaudible unless one listened closely.

Not knowing why, the monk frowned and glared at the girl with a frightening look. The monk complained to the girl with a resigned expression, but Akino's eyes looked gingerly upward and the monk could only force himself to swallow all of his anger.

".....Anyway, hurry up and finish. We're going to prepare lunch, so go help prepare the food!"

"O-Okay....."

Akino immediately replied and picked up her broom, adjusting her glasses at the same time. After Tadanori stared at the girl again as if exhorting her, he walked back into the hall.

Tadanori was the person in charge of the vihara[9] and was a man who liked to reprimand others, but right now he had become cautious. It wasn't just him, all of the adults in this monastery were like that. It was a rare fortune when disagreements were settled without angers flaring.

Even with that said, nothing like that truly ever happened. Akino hastily swept all the leaves together into a basket. After throwing the leaves into the incinerator behind the monastery, she walked towards the storehouse to help prepare lunch. There was a monastery kitchen in this warehouse along with many rooms for monks. There were also kitchens set up in the wooden monk rooms.

Shouts sounded out the instant she entered.

"You're slow! Akino! What were you doing!?"

"S-Sorry....."

"Akino, there's not enough firewood!"

"O-Okay..... I'll go get some now....."

Akino responded while sprinting to the right, carrying back the firewood stacked under the eaves of the building. Probably because gasoline was very precious, its usage was restricted. Hence, they basically used a wood-burning stove to cook food every day.

But their fire lighting method was very unique - it was very strange indeed.

The seniors of the vihara stood in front of the stove, forming hand seals towards it and chanting incantations with their eyes half-closed. Not long afterwards, the firewood inside ignited into flame.

This was magic.

Moreover, it was classified as true first-class magic under modern Onmyou law.

"Get the plates out now, Akino!"

"Okay....."

"Hurry up a bit.....!? You, this again!"

"S.....Sorry....."

Angry and impatient scolding lambasted the slow idiot. Akino tearfully picked up the pieces of the shattered plate. But she was still loudly scolded by her seniors after this. Akino hastily cried out while dealing with her task. The monastery's diet ought to be vegetarian, but this wasn't strictly followed. Poverty was one thing, but eating meat without concern was another thing. What they were roasting right now was the venison they had hunted several days earlier.

Akino's stomach rumbled with hunger. The lid clattered and started to shake as if responding to her.

After finishing lunch and cleaning up a bit, Akino had a bit of free time until it was time to prepare the dinner that they called 'slop'. Akino surreptitiously watched her seniors, taking a smaller fire-starter from the warehouse and some small sweet potatoes and walking to the temple in the dilapidated half of the monastery grounds.

Akino first dug a shallow hole in the ground. After putting the sweet potatoes in, she put fallen leaves on top, then lit them and covered them with ash. After checking that the leaves had ignited, she quietly sat at the base of a cedar tree that stood nearby.

Since it hadn't rained recently, the leaves burned into ash very quickly. Akino watched the ash get blown away by the wind while quietly waiting for the sweet potatoes to finish roasting. It was because she would be scolded by Tadanori if he saw her in her hiding place secretly roasting and eating food that she had snuck away. Even if she were spotted by another senior, it would all be confiscated.

The monastery Akino lived at was called Seishuku Temple. It was a mountain monastery situated near the peak of a mountain, far away from civilization. Getting here was extremely difficult and it was like a place isolated from the outside world.

No, it wasn't 'like' that, it was intended to be secluded. Even the surroundings of the monastery actively hid their existence from the world. It was a place that had fallen behind the times. It was a different world from beyond the foot of the mountain, a true mountainous alternate world.

Akino was the youngest in this alternate world and also the weakest. She was always at the bottom of the hierarchy. Putting aside appearances for now, she was in a position where she was denied everything. Even in the lunch just earlier, none of the delicious venison had been shared with her. Even though she had low expectations, she had ended up crestfallen. So she had taken the opportunity she saw today to fill the appetite of her growing period.

The fire's heat had already vanished. The cold air seemed to seep into her body bit by bit as she sat directly on the ground. But it was fortunate that it wasn't windy. Akino wrapped her arms around her knees, curling into a small ball and quietly stared at the ash. Akino thought that if this way could make the sweet potatoes become a bit warmer and a bit more delicious, she didn't mind waiting in the cold. Her heart was also a bit happy, as well as tense, from sneaking food. Actually, roasting sweet potatoes was the only thing Akino had felt to be fun these past few days.

"......Sweet potatoes~ Sweet potatoes~ Are you done yet? Delicious~ Hot~ Piping....."

It was unclear whether her timing was correct, but whether they were done or not completely relied on Akino's own intuition.

"They're almost done", "Ah, I'll wait a bit more."

Right as Akino leisurely talked to herself.

"Hey, Akino!"

A voice suddenly barked out from behind her and Akino went speechless out of fright. She held her knees, and at the same time, her body went stiff. Simultaneously, above her head - the area at the top, where there ought to have been nothing at all - a 'disturbance' occurred, a phenomenon that was called lag. Then, the things hidden there materialized and revealed themselves.

Two long ears protruded slightly. They were two rabbit ears, covered in whitish-silver fur. It wasn't just ears. A short round tail also appeared on her bottom that sat on the ground. It was a rabbit tail, just like her ears.

The wide-eyed Akino was unable to move, and only her ears swiveled in all directions in a panic. "Haha." A dry laugh sounded out after Akino was seen like that. After hearing this, her tension suddenly vanished and she relaxed, the ears on her head collapsing as if they had run out of energy.

"Sen-jiichan[10]....."

She looked back with an unhappy expression as an old man walked out from among the cedar trees smiling. His white hair hung in a vertical bun, and when taken together with his white beard, one knew he was an elderly man at a glance. Strangely, he wore a worn-out white coat, patched-up hakama and an eye-catching linen gown. But inexplicably, he looked unreliable at first glance, not just from his lazy appearance. A teasing smile surfaced on his wrinkle-filled face as he revealed a childish, cutesy disposition.

"Don't be so surprised, Akino. You haven't had enough practice."

"It was Sen-jiichan who scared me~ Especially since you even changed your voice....."

"What do you think I am, to be so scared of me? What are those long ears for?"

"I-I don't have them because I like them....."

"Haha, you probably got happy from seeing the sweet potatoes. Tadanori-san will notice you sooner or later if you're like that. He's been in an irritable mood recently, so you'll definitely get a serious scolding if you get caught."

Sen laughed loudly, but Akino frowned "Uu--", the ears on her head crooking into '〈' characters. Actually, since Sen had noticed her, she couldn’t assert that Tadanori hadn't.

"Aren't they valuable ears? You always hide them, you should use them if they're effective."

"T-That's none of Sen-jiichan's business."

Akino pouted her cheeks, tightly hugging her knees and curling into a ball. But she couldn't conceal her ears now.

Akino was one of those who were called 'possessed'.

It seemed that they were also called 'living spirits' recently. The so-called 'living spirits' originally referred to people who had been possessed by 'oni' and who would therefore become oni. But in modern times, when it was believed that oni were a kind of spirit, it seemed that people possessed by spirits other than oni were also collectively called 'living spirits'. In that sense, living spirits weren't any rare occurrence in this Seishuku Temple, at least putting aside how normal society was for now. Though it couldn't be said that there were many either, inugami-possessed or fox spirit-possessed people often came through here[11].

But unfortunately, Akino wasn't an ordinary living spirit.

She was the living spirit of a 'rabbit' not often seen in this world.

"No matter how much you want to hide it, it looks like they'll pop out every time you're spooked. It's like a kitsune trying to hide its tail with poor transformation ability."

"You don't need to worry about that. Though I'm still unskilled now, I'll be able to hide them well as long as I practice more."

"No matter how well you hide them, everyone's going to know about your ears soon enough."

"That doesn't matter. I want to hide them."

Akino, in a bad mood, became a bit mouthy.

Those long rabbit ears were the root of Akino's inferiority complex.

She didn't know or want to know what other people thought, but to Akino, having 'these kinds of things' bouncing up and down on her head only felt upsetting and truly useless.

There were people who called her bunny girl, and there were people who avoided and disliked her.

More importantly, Akino herself definitely didn't have the talent to become anything great - rather, since she was an idiot and because of the counterproductive attention of her rare rabbit living spirit, she had ended up being treated as an idiot and was ordered around.

Other people also treated her like an exotic animal.

To Akino, these hateful ears were the symbol of her being treated as a useless object.

"I myself think they're a pair of pretty cute ears."

"That..... isn't true."

Akino curled into a ball while deliberately denying his compliment.

But while she slowly replyed, the tips of her ears happily jumped up. Another reason Akino always disliked showing her ears was that they would fully express her hidden feelings. But the fact that Akino didn't hide her ears in front of Sen nonetheless was proof of how close Akino was with Sen.

The way Sen teased Akino's rabbit ears without reservations wasn't like the feeling of how other people talked about them with contempt and malice.

In contrast, Sen treated the useless Akino like his granddaughter. Sen was the only person Akino could relax around in the monastery.

Akino's long ears shook as she asked Sen: "Sen-jiichan, are you watering again?"

"Yeah, that's right.' Sen replied while turning to face the temple next to them.

The temple was almost completely dilapidated. Its walls and roof were covered in holes, and also, it was completely filled with weeds as high as the floor. It seemed it had been called the Tachibana Hall[12] and was still spacious as a broken-down room. Since there was no one else who used it, Sen had brought in pots with saplings planted in them and carefully raised them by himself.

Akino was also often nearby killing time. In any case, she could feel the most at ease in the place that Sen often was in.

"Is your work okay?"

"I finished a long time ago."

"Aahhh..... Unwittingly, you..... I heard that Sen-jiichan's always like that. Why can you finish it so easily?"

"I'm me, you know. I've lived several times as long as you have. Finishing that level of work quickly is natural."

Sen was a male servant in the Seishuku Temple and responsible for doing the monastery's chores, just like how Akino was in the vihara. Even though he did work that was difficult for his aged body, this kindly old man was always floaty and leisurely. Akino couldn't help but think that he was used to such things. However, to Akino, she couldn't imagine getting accustomed to these kinds of things at all.

"It feels like I could do a lot of things if I were able to finish a bit sooner....."

She tried quietly murmuring words that didn't sound realistic at all.

Akino looked twelve or thirteen, but even she didn't know her true age.

She had lived at the Seishuku Temple since as far back as she could remember, and other than going to the foot of the mountain as an envoy, she never went anywhere else. She lived this uninteresting life every day along with the changing of seasons. Even she didn't know how much she had grown during this time. She couldn't imagine that there would be any change if she tried doing a bit more.

But--

"Well..... will this place still exist when that time comes?"

Sen smiled while speaking in an uncharacteristically clear voice. The tips of Akino's ears slightly twitched in response, and she looked up at Sen above her head with an "Eh--".

"Sen-jiichan? What does that mean....."

"Hey, Akino."

"Yeah?"

"Are the sweet potatoes done?"

"Sweet potatoes? ...Ahh!?"

She had completely forgotten. She grabbed her broom in a panic, digging the sweet potatoes out of the ash. Just like she had anticipated, their outer skin had been baked black. Akino wailed while Sen laughed "haha--".

"Well, alright, I'll be going, the food will be gone soon....."

After saying this, Sen walked into the Tachibana Hall to water the saplings.

After that, Akino got rid of the outer half of the roasted sweet potatoes and only managed to eat the center portions. But she was very fortunate as the un-burnt parts were roasted very well, Akino managed to console herself.

After she destroyed and concealed the evidence of her sneaking food, she strolled around appropriately - cautiously hiding her ears - and then returned to the warehouse.

Preparation for dinner would start soon, before twilight.

Dinner was called 'slop' in the monastery because only two meals were served at the monastery, breakfast and lunch. They didn't eat food at dinner, but ate 'slop' instead. Of course, in Seishuku Temple where even meat was scarce, it was just a formalized name. Akino was scolded by her seniors again and scampered around with a tearful expression while preparing for dinner.

Partway through, there wasn't enough firewood again, and she went outside to bring some in.

Then, when Akino was picking up the firewood stacked under the eave with an "uurgh", she heard Tadanori's voice.

"......You're so impatient again. The identity..... Yeah, if it's there....."

She looked over. He had a sad expression on his face and held a cell phone with one hand while walking from the temple.

"......Here already? Understood. For now, I'll send people over. Will you be here tomorrow? ..... Yeah..... Nn....."

He replied several times over the phone and then turned off the phone after the conversation ended. Akino quietly stared at Tadanori. Rather than being interested in the contents of the conversation, she was more interested in how Tadanori had a phone.

Because of the work in the monastery, there was cell phone reception deep in the mountain, and there were also cell phones. But Akino naturally didn't have one, and she hadn't even touched one. A cell phone was one of the things Akino wanted the most.

After Tadanori noticed Akino staring wordlessly at him, he looked over. In order to avoid being viewed as being lazy, Akino hastily turned away, carrying the firewood and walking away.

But Tadanori called out to Akino as she turned her back and prepared to leave.

"Akino--"

"Y-Yes? I-I wasn't slacking. I'm seriously preparing for dinner....."

"Yeah. That's enough of that. I just wanted to ask you to be an envoy."

"An envoy?"

"Yes. Go to the Front Hall right now for me."

Upon hearing that, Akino inadvertently revealed the ears she had originally hidden - though she was surprised, there was some joy in that.

Just like its name, the Front Hall was outside the monastery grounds - it was a Seishuku Temple hall erected in an area at the foot of the mountain.

It had been remodeled long before Akino had been born, and it had been used by the town as a storehouse to store purchased materials up to now. To Akino, who could almost never go out, that place was like a connection to the outside world.

"Go down the mountain before it gets dark, if you can. It would be best to come back tomorrow, so hurry up and go."

Akino's heart beat even faster when she heard that she could stay overnight. She could spread her wings and soar high tonight - and play to her heart's content. No matter what, there were magazines from the outside at the Front Hall along with televisions. Though there were magazines, televisions, and internet-enabled computers in the monastery, Akino couldn't monopolize any of them. Her small freedom in this moment was like a momentary breather that she felt ecstatic about.

Then,

"I-If it's right now, then what about dinner.....?"

"Go find some afterwards. There's fast food."

She couldn't help but feel amazed. She almost threw down the firewood to raise her arms and cheered. She could eat cup noodles there. To Akino, this was a blessing that she hadn't had in a year. Were the thoughts in her mind reflected on her face? Tadanori's face became overcast. Akino hastily put away her childish expression.

Only then did she notice that she hadn't heard something important.

She carried the firewood back while asking.

"Then, Priest Tadanori? What exactly am I an envoy for?"

"Haven't you heard? I'm going to contact Kengyou-sama now. It seems like there will be a new disciple. It seems that the person is already at the foot of the mountain."

Just then, there was a bit of a 'disturbance' above her head, and Akino hastily pressed down on her head. The eyes behind her glasses became wide and round.

"He[13] has to leave soon. So tomorrow, you'll bring that person to the monastery in my stead, alright?"

Tadanori frowned and Akino returned to the temple with him. After giving Akino the key to the Front Hall, he returned to his work. On the other hand, Akino, who was left behind, was still in a state of shock after accepting the key.

Tadanori said to bring the disciple to the monastery.

Anyway, there would be a new person at the monastery.

Anticipation and uneasy emotions churned in her heart. It had already been several years since a newcomer. What kind of person would it be? A male? A female? How old? Would it be a gentle person or a bad-hearted individual? Would that person mock Akino if he or she saw her rabbit ears?

"......Ah, hmm? Wait! If that person's already at the foot, that means....."

'Living at the Front Hall and bringing him or her tomorrow' meant that Akino would have to stay together with the newcomer tonight.

Suddenly, the uneasy feeling rapidly swelled in comparison to her anticipation. It would be fine if he or she was someone easy to talk to, but if not, then she might be too nervous to sleep. What should she do!?

...Akino, whose sorrow seemed to have all gathered on her face, heard the caw of a crow from the distance as she left alone. The sky was already completely tinted with the sunset glow, and the sun gradually sank. Though Akino had confidence in her speed, it was overly dangerous to walk the mountain path at night. So she had to hurry down the mountain before the sun set completely.

She hastily returned to the warehouse, explaining the situation to her seniors.

Originally, it had been a busy time, but Akino wanted to leave, so her seniors were extremely sarcastic with Akino, but it couldn't be delayed since it was a mission from above. Akino constantly apologized and then left the warehouse in a hurry.

The red-tinted maple leaves swayed with the wind and then quietly fell.

☆

Since it had been a long time since she had the opportunity to come out and walk, the sky was black and the surroundings had been shrouded in darkness by the time Akino finally walked down the mountain.

She went through the mountain woods via terraced fields on the mountain's slope. Lights from homes of farming families were sparsely dotted through the vast depths of the gorge.

Then, the hills that surrounded this area spread out above her head just as it turned to night. The clouds in the sky were unusually eye-catching, and she could feel a heavy atmosphere. It wasn't so much from being immersed in the faint moonlight scattered from between the clouds but rather from the feeling that it gave the deep blue sky a different color. The clouds that floated from one side of the moon to another changed their shapes bit by bit as they slowly flowed.

Akino normally lived surrounded by a tall cedar forest. In that world, Akino would occasionally come to an empty, open place and be overwhelmed by the feeling of vastness upon seeing the sky. Like a rabbit that crawled out from under the ground. She originally thought of herself as extremely miniscule, even petty, an existence like a pebble or a weed.

But on the other hand, she suddenly thought of running to some corner below that sky and suddenly had an inexplicable feeling.

Even if she didn't know where to go - even if she could just go to some place she imagined, her heart couldn't stop beating and she had thoughts of single-mindedly running forward. The others in the monastery probably also held the same feelings.

Akino hadn't left the mountain.

Even Akino knew of the outside world. She had only received the most basic teachings from the adults in the monastery. Through magazines, television, internet - of course, it wasn't complete - she had understood normal societal practices about the world outside the mountain.

But that was just knowledge, and it was the knowledge about another world. Though she wanted to go sometime, it was a foreign world after all.

Akino was a foreign body herself, as she had experienced personally all this time. Though living spirits were very valuable, it was just a rabbit living spirit. How many people who had lived in such an enclosed place since as far back as they could remember were here in Japan today? Though the monastery was abnormal to the outside world, it was everything to her.

But why did she really want to run out and see the scenery across from the monastery?

Of course, her slow self definitely couldn't give an answer to such a thing no matter how she thought.

".....Ah, I'm hungry."

It would already be time to eat dinner at the monastery. Akino clutched the key, continuing towards the Front Hall.

The front Hall was the junction between Seishuku Temple and the county road, situated in the center of a patch of narrow, flat land.

Even though it was called a hall, it looked like an old warehouse from the outside. Normally there was just an automatic defensive barrier around it, but today the outside light by the entrance for imported goods was lit, revealing a small orange-colored light.

There were two figures beneath that light.

One was a familiar face, and the other was an unfamiliar face. Akino's heartbeat beat violently.

"Ah, aren't you the rabbit? You were the messenger?"

"P-Priest Kengyou!? Please don't call me that! I’ve always told you!"

"Well, even with your hips and chest, you look like a rabbit. You've probably grown since then, right? Hmm?"

"T-T-That....."

What was he saying so suddenly in front of a newcomer!? Akino blushed and stared at the suit-wearing man before her - Priest Kengyou.

Though Kengyou was an ajari of Seishuku Temple, he didn't wear priest clothes nor was his head shaven bald. He was always working outside the monastery and was good in various aspects.

This women-loving depraved monk would be evaluated very badly in several aspects as a disciple. Akino seemed to still be outside Kengyou's strike range, so she was accustomed to this banter.

"Anyway, did you hear about everything? This person is someone who hopes to enter the monastery, which we haven't had one of for many years."

Kengyou lightly stroked his chin, speaking with an arrogant tone. Before Akino readied herself to face him again, the figure waiting behind him stepped out from Kengyou's side.

It was a girl.

And she was very young. But she was older than Akino. Perhaps she was already a high school student. Her long black hair reflected her snow-white skin. She had a slender body and a beautiful figure. As someone of the same gender, Akino was also taken aback. This was an outstandingly beautiful girl in both features and figure.

But she gave off a very cold impression.

Was it the moonlight she was immersed in from above her head? She couldn't see anything resembling like or dislike in her eyes that stared at Akino. That expression too, as calm and unruffled as the surface of a lake. She gave off more of a calm, thorough impression than an indifferent one. She was more hardened and solitary than dispassionate.

She wore a short coat, shorts, and long stockings. She wore fingerless gloves and somewhat short boots on her feet. A handbag in a camouflage pattern was slung over her shoulder. Rather than being boyish, it was more like she was dressed completely for efficiency and without embellishment. So, that discrepancy was clearly evident as if it dominated the girl's characteristics.

But there were exceptions in that utilitarian outfit.

There was a pink ribbon tying the girl's long black hair.

"......Um....."

Just as Akino was about to greet her, she immediately noticed that she didn't know what to say.

She judged her to be the type that wasn't very easy to talk to and even felt scared.

But though she wasn't sure of the reasons, she felt a strange sense of wrongness. Other people might not feel anything. However, there was something palpable, gloomy, and wrong - something ominous.

Even so, she couldn't move her gaze away from her.

"....."

The girl also wordlessly looked back at Akino, who couldn't say anything and just stared intently at her. Then, the aroma of the mountain soil, vegetation, and the like mixed together and a faint scent surfaced to float through the surroundings.

It was the scent of incense she had never smelled.

Then,

"...Nice to meet you, I'm Hokuto."

The girl opened her mouth.

Flat words, but a pure voice.

"A-Ah, yes! I-I'm, um, uh, Akino, so.....!?"

She suddenly became tense and tongue-tied. This was definitely a very bad impression. With the teasing words Kengyou had just said, this was the worst

first impression. Maybe she was already being treated like an idiot by the girl who still didn't make any particular reactions.

Kengyou was rather unconcerned about the red-faced Akino, remarking with a disorganized attitude.

"Then, that's done, right? Akino, I'll be leaving, so I'll leave everything else to you."

"Eh? Y-You're already leaving?"

"You got here too late, I already finished everything. I have to return to the town today."

Kengyou checked his watch while speaking without politeness, but Akino was quickly overwhelmed by panic.

"But, you didn't really introduce us....."

"Just do whatever you like over the evening. Come to think of it, I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I don't have time to keep talking."

Kengyou shot a sideways glance at the girl with a cold gaze, saying that. The girl was still responseless.

Akino's stomach had already started hurting.

"Then see you later. Don't do anything troublesome."

Kengyou selfishly left those words, explained nothing further, and left. Just like that, he walked towards the car stopped on the county road. Akino seemed driven into the corner and stared at the girl before her as Kengyou left behind their backs.

Then,

"Ah, right."

Unexpectedly, Kengyou stopped and turned back.

"Akino, Hokuto, you guys will get along in the monastery, right? Since the two of you are comrades with the same nature."

"Eh? Wh-What does that mean?"

Kengyou smiled lightly at Akino who asked back. It was the smile she often saw in the monastery from her seniors and ajari. A smile that mocked a weakling, an expression that mocked someone in the last place.

"Because you're both valuable living spirits, so practice as much as possible and do your best working for the monastery."

Part 3

Maybe she wouldn't be able to sleep that night.

In contrast to that pessimism, Akino ate three cups of cup ramen for dinner and slept soundly clutching her stomach until dawn. Right at nine o'clock, the newcomer girl – Hokuto, who gradually awoke - got up. People in the monastery got up early. Disciples usually got up at four. If they slept in, there were punishments.

Tadanori hadn't mentioned a deadline for bringing Hokuto up the mountain, but she would definitely be scolded if she didn't return before lunch. After Akino and Hokuto busied themselves eating breakfast, they departed from the Front Hall.

Stones were piled into a stair shape through the path continuing up to Seishuku Temple. Lush cedar forests grew all around them. Tall, sturdy, moss-covered cedar trees extended from the dense grass under the trees without limit, like pillars supporting the sky. The path stretched endlessly upwards between those cedar trees.

The mountainside was very tranquil. The only sounds they could hear were the sounds of their own footsteps and breathing. Sometimes the chirps of

mountainside birds would reach them, and the echoing of the sounds seemed to add contrast to the stillness of the forest.

"....."

Akino who walked ahead climbed the mountain path while often looking behind her.

Aside from Akino who had grown up on the mountain, the mountain path would definitely be exhausting for someone not used to it - especially for a delicate female. But Hokuto basically had no issue as she carried the seemingly very heavy bag, indifferently following behind her. She didn't seem worried about running out of breath at all. Though it wasn't visible, it seemed that she was actually quite tough.

In that case, the next problem was the silence between the two.

Hokuto was a reticent girl.

They had watched television and eaten together last night, but Hokuto hadn't opened her mouth to speak at all while there. At least reply to me if I talk. That was the minimum standard necessary to be tolerable. Thanks to this, she hadn't properly introduced herself from last night until now. Even she felt embarrassed.

But even so, she knew that Hokuto wasn't as indifferent a person as the impression she gave out at first. She would actively respond if she told her something, and she was very obedient to Akino's complex instructions without a bit of displeasure on her face. Also, last night she had let Akino choose the television channels and the flavor of cup ramen that she liked from the very start. There had only been one sofa, and Akino had invited her to sit, but she firmly refused and let Akino sit there. She hadn't been mad or anxious when she overslept today either, elegantly making the bed. She was beautiful and elegant, simply an angel to Akino.

But when Hokuto didn't express her emotions, she didn't know what she was thinking about, and that was the truth. Also, the hateful feeling of wrongness she had felt when they first met each other hadn't gone away.

"....."

If they went forward to the monastery like this, Hokuto would become a member of the disciples. The male seniors would definitely be head over heels to please her because she was such a beautiful woman. In that case, Akino would definitely be asked to do many, many things for them to get close to Hokuto.

Since she didn't know anything at all right now, she might not treat Akino well after learning Akino's position in the monastery, even though she treated Akino respectfully right now. She would very quickly become like everyone else and would definitely treat Akino high-handedly..... Akino thought of that kind of premonition.

...Hmm?

During that, she felt that something was wrong.

It wasn't any very substantial reason, it was just that she couldn't imagine that natural future scene occurring with Hokuto. Perhaps it was because Hokuto was different from the other disciples in the monastery. Because the atmosphere entwined around her was too incongruous, she couldn't imagine the scene of her being tainted by the atmosphere of her seniors.

Of course, it might be because Akino's imagination was insufficient.

"....."

Akino glanced at the silently climbing Hokuto a few times out of the corner of her eye.

Then,

"...We didn't really talk yesterday."

Suddenly, Hokuto opened her mouth. Akino stopped in surprise, then instinctively covered her head with her hands.

...O-Oh no!?

Was she doomed for stopping? Akino gingerly looked back.

But Hokuto stared over dumbstruck, blinking as if a bit shocked.

It seemed that she was taken aback by her covering her head right as she was going to speak. She was probably tired and had accidentally shown her idiot attributes.

"What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"I-It's nothing! I'm completely fine!"

After Akino replied with a blush, Hokuto laughed quietly while wondering.

A bitter laugh. But it wasn't a sarcastic bitter laugh like the people in the monastery. It was the first time she had seen Hokuto's sincere expression.

Akino coughed dryly to urge herself on.

"U-Um, Hokuto-san.....?"

"You can just call me Hokuto. I said that yesterday too, since I'm a newcomer."

"Ah, but, you're older than me, and I'm not used to calling people by their name directly....."

Akino still hadn't made a friend that she could call directly by their name. She saw Hokuto get confused, but Hokuto didn't press the matter, smiling at Akino again instead.

"I didn't think there would be any young people like you here."

Hokuto spoke in a calm tone.

"But it's natural if you think about it. Since not everyone in this dark temple came here of their own will."

Hokuto's gaze didn't meet Akino as she said this, but instead looked in the direction of the mountain road behind her.

Akino rarely met true adults who came from outside, but they had treated Akino with this kind of attitude when she had been a child. It was pathetic as her senior in the monastery, but Hokuto was more adult-like. But even so, it made her happy that she was able to sincerely converse even if she treated Akino like a child.

But.

"Dark temple?"

"Eh, uhh, sorry. That way of putting it is very rude, right?"

"V-Very rude? .....You mean Seishuku Temple?"

"You don't know?"

Hokuto asked back as if very surprised, and Akino automatically apologized "Sorry, sorry....."

"Since I still haven't left Seishuku Temple."

"Eh? Then Akino-san was born in the monastery?"

"Though I wasn't born in the monastery, I was raised there as a baby..... Also, u-um, don't call me 'san', it's a bit embarrassing."

'Dark temple' was probably Seishuku Temple's nickname outside. It was her first time hearing it.

She felt like it was an evil name. Well, if she tried thinking about it, there would obviously be many similarities.

"Then Akino-chan always lived in Seishuku Temple, huh."

"D-Don't call me 'chan' either, you can just call me Akino directly."

"Is that so? Then please call me Hokuto as well."

"Eh? Y-Yeah..... Okay....."

Akino managed to reply and Hokuto smiled.

Her attitude was less estranged compared to when they had first met yesterday. Probably even Hokuto had been a bit guarded. That cold atmosphere had been a manifestation of that. But if what Akino feared showed some signs of abating, might the reason be that she had slept in this morning?

A mountain bird cried out from somewhere.

The refreshing wind blew - the scent of incense she had smelled yesterday wafted lightly from Hokuto. It wasn't a bad scent. Living in the monastery, she had long since gotten used to smells of incenses. But the scent from Hokuto's body was more like a subtle hint of incense than a scent that Akino knew.

The two of them started walking to the monastery again.

"Akino, do you have any idea what they do in the monastery? ...No, do you know?"

"I know. Um..... the monastery people all practice magic."

Since she was going to Seishuku Temple, Hokuto ought to know this much. Even so, Akino truthfully explained to her.

Because of the government, magic had begun to be widely used. Supposedly, half a century ago, on the eve of the Pacific War, the various magics passed down since ancient times had been analysed one by one and then added into an overall system that further developed it.

Contemporary magic was managed by a national organization - the Onmyou Agency. The magic that the Onmyou Agency recognized as having real effects was named 'First-Class Magic', and one had to obtain qualifications set by Onmyou law to use 'First-Class Magic'.

"The current mainstream magic can barely be called Onmyoudou. Actually, magic from other systems have all been added into it. Like Vajrayana, Shintoism, Shugendo, and other types..... Hmm? Then in that case, why is it called 'General Onmyoudou'?"

"Because the great man who added those other magics and established the foundations of modern magic wasn't a monk or a Shintoist, but rather, an Onmyouji."

"Ah, you know! He was the practitioner in the military during wartime. What was he called? I seem to remember that he was called....."

She felt like it had been a slightly unusual name having to do with light[14]. Probing the depths of her memory, Akino pondered baselessly with a "hmm".

Then,

"......Yakou."

"Eh?"

"......He was called Tsuchimikado Yakou."

"Ah, right! That was his name."

Hokuto seemed to have detailed knowledge about this aspect. Every time she said a word, she seemed to be reducing her prestige as a monastery senior. She felt ashamed.

...Ah, but.....

"Right. Tsuchimikado Yakou called himself a terrorist."

The instant Akino accidentally whispered this, she noticed Hokuto shiver slightly. Noticing this, Akino turned to Hokuto.

"Hmm? Hokuto-san - no, Hokuto - you didn't know? This time last year..... Hmm, I think it was in the summer? That Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation went around committing crimes everywhere."

This was news that even she knew. Akino tried asking, feeling surprised.

Hokuto paused slightly before her reply.

".....I know."

"Oh. So you did know. Well, he's very famous in the magic community. I heard there was an arrest warrant issued by the nation."

"....."

Hokuto didn't respond to Akino's words, her expression almost frozen. But Akino didn't notice. Her naive mood had become good upon finding out a common topic.

"That reincarnation often becomes a topic in our monastery, you know? Especially because, well, isn't the monastery an extremely serious place that practices magic? That kind of topic spreads very easily....."

Akino glanced at Hokuto's appearance to be a bit prudent. Even so, she didn't need to worry. Hokuto's face revealed that she already had an understanding regarding 'Seishuku Temple's matters'.

"Speaking of hiding practitioners, do they come here because there are two important practitioners gathered together in the monastery?"[15]

Akino smiled briefly towards Hokuto's calm tone of confirmation, replying with a "haha".

"It seems like it. Though I don't know too much about the hiding or the two professionals....."

Right now, magic was legally regulated by Onmyou law, and most practitioners were managed by the Onmyou Agency.

But not all of them.

The first magics and the history of practitioners was even more ancient than the history of Onmyou law and the Onmyou Agency. It was baseless to say that it had a grasp on those magics and practitioners decades after the war. More importantly, there was also quite a bit of darkness concealed behind magic. What the public authorities dictated didn't seep into all groups of people that easily.

So the Onmyou Agency's scope of management couldn't reach the 'depths' of the magic community that formed various different networks, just the so-called 'surface'. Seishuku Temple that was known as the dark temple was one of the representative hubs of these networks.

Information, techniques, and talented people who never appeared on the 'surface' gathered here.

For example, Hokuto, who currently wanted to enter the monastery, was quite the talented person.

"Hokuto-san, were you introduced by a branch monastery?"

"......Uh. Well."

"It's very strange recently, but it seems like there were a lot of those people before, right? Seishuku Temple's branch monasteries are all over the nation. I heard that it was to increase the spreading of techniques or something like that..... A lot of people with various talents come to visit the monastery....."

Akino explained to Hokuto while unintentionally becoming ambiguous.

There were various people who aimed to become practitioners, but they had something in common. That was the 'spirit-sensing ability'. To a user of modern magic, it was the talent and ability to 'see' aura.

Everyone carried aura on their body, and everyone possessed spiritual power, but there were very few people who could feel aura and spiritual power. But magic was based on techniques that controlled spiritual power, so thinking of becoming

a practitioner - becoming one of the extreme few who could use first-class magic - was impossible without that ability.

But because the people who possessed such an ability were few, there were quite a few examples of those who were respected by others at the same time as they were abhorred and disgusted.

It was human nature to be wary of people different from oneself and treat them differently. Nowadays, information regarding magic had spread to the streets and could be picked up by normal people. But even so, people who possessed an abnormal ability - who had 'superpowers' - received critical gazes from those around them. Especially in an environment that lacked an understanding of magic, it was very difficult for people possessing the spirit-seeing ability to live an ordinary life. So if the ancient magic-related portion of the spiritual-disaster-prone Tokyo were taken out of the picture, society's level of understanding definitely wouldn't be very high. Even if they tried to coexist, there would be many people who would end up meeting misfortune.

Places like the Seishuku Temple or its branch monasteries dealt with those circumstances.

The abnormals that society didn't accept would be taken into the monastery, which would train them into mature practitioners.

The so-called 'disciples' were the immature practitioners gathered in the monastery.

".....It's very rare. Because there's no where else to go."

There were many people with bad hearts among the 'disciples' in the monastery. Twisted people, people who got angry easily, people who overly disdained others.....

But they were also young people who had grown up in unfortunate environments, people with nowhere to go other than the monastery.

Akino was no counterexample. She had been abandoned in the monastery and had lived there since she had been a baby. It would definitely be quite disheartening if a baby grew rabbit ears. There was no helping it that her parents had given up and entrusted her to the dark temple that was very good at dealing with such things. Rather, it was fortunate that she had been blessed with being able to live at the monastery after being born - it was because she didn't know her parents that she didn't feel anything like resentment or anger towards them. She felt like things were better off this way.

"Ah, but, I actually have relatives in Tokyo, you know? Though I can't meet them. But they're some famous family that has to do with magic for generations..... If I do my best practicing, I might be able to live with my relatives in Tokyo someday."

Of course, Akino completely understood that such a thing was impossible. An old-timer at the monastery - Sen - had told her that she had relatives in Tokyo. She had believed him very simply when she had heard as a child, and though she still couldn't do anything even after she heard it, she ought to thank him.

Hokuto definitely had similar situations.

.....Ah.

Then, when she thought of that, Akino stopped. She thought of what Kengyou had said when they parted yesterday.

"Um, Hokuto-s-- No, Hokuto?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask something? Um, yesterday, what Priest Kengyou said....."

Hokuto seemed to realize immediately after she tactfully opened her mouth.

"About the valuable living spirit?"

Hokuto replied straightforwardly to Akino, but her expression was very complex. As expected, it had been impolite.

"U-Um!?" Akino shrank back in shame.

But Hokuto wasn't concerned.

"Now that you mention it, Akino's also a living spirit. I'm a water dragon living spirit."

"Water dragon?"

"Yeah."

That was indeed quite valuable. At least Akino hadn't heard of such until now.

The so-called water dragons were a type of water spirit. Though they were a sub-type of dragons, they were treated as being in the dragon family.[16] They looked similar to snakes, but she seemed to remember that they had horns, hands, and feet. In any case, there were extremely few people who saw a water dragon.

...Ah, right.....

The incongruous feeling Akino had felt from Hokuto's body might have been because of that water dragon living spirit. In any case, Akino didn't even know what a so-called water dragon was. If she considered it seriously, the peculiar scent Hokuto gave off might be because of the effect of the water dragon.

...But if she were a water dragon living spirit, maybe.....

Maybe Hokuto had something like a snake's tail similar to Akino's ears? Or did she even have fangs or something like a forked tongue? Though she was very interested, questioning any further was certainly no good.

"Akino, what kind of living spirit are you? Could you tell me, if you don't mind?"

Her face unconsciously twitched at Hokuto's question. But it would be too sly for only her to ask questions. Akino averted her gaze slightly as if having great trouble replying.

"I'm a r-rabbit living spirit."

Albeit her embarrassment, she was curious about Hokuto's response after saying that. Akino returned her averted gaze to Hokuto.

"Rabbit, huh? That's really unusual. Come to think of it, I didn't even know rabbit living spirits existed."

"......Are they even rarer than water dragons?"

"Yeah. Water dragons should be very rare too, but even so, there were people who were possessed by water dragons or who got close to snake spirits in the past, like the records of the people who were possessed by the Yato-no-kami[17]. Especially snakes, they're actually a pretty large number of them. But as for rabbits....."

Hokuto gazed at Akino with a completely different look from before. Akino felt embarrassed anyway and turned away to hide it.

...As expected, I'm really weird.

She didn't need to especially ask such a thing. Hokuto didn't mock her or get surprised either, remedying the incident. If Akino had been betrayed and taken for an idiot, she might have sunk into gloom and depression.

"A-Anyways. Get along with the living spirits at the monastery, okay? There are a lot of different kinds of people there. There aren't just 'disciples' like me, there are also many actual priests. Also, even though there's talk about people hiding here and the two important people, everyone in the monastery lives an ordinary life."

Akino changed the topic, continuing to explain to Hokuto.

Actually, the people in the monastery weren't legally qualified to use first-class magic, and they were very indifferent to the fact that they were lawbreakers. Incidentally, Akino herself hadn't noticed that the people around her were actually the equivalent of criminals.

Of course, the fact that they were able to keep from panicking with such a common practice was because the people in the monastery didn't know what work done in the outside world was like. But that was why they were called hopeless.

Many people in the monastery just did their work to live.

"Although there are a lot of inconvenient things compared to the town outside, you get used to it when you live here for a long time. I think you'll get used to it quickly..... ah, well, although..... right now, maybe..... it's a bit nerve-wracking....."

"Did something happen in the monastery?"

"Hah..... well actually, the priests had some fights starting this year..... It seems like it was because there were some opposing views....."

In the end, it was a small monastery, and a head-on open confrontation wouldn't happen.

But it was the truth that the priests of Seishuku Temple had split into two factions. That was also the reason that for Tadanori's constant foul mood.

"Ah, but, it's okay if you don't worry about it. Because it's just the priests, so it has nothing to do with us..... But anyways, it had something to do with the national Onmyou Agency organization, I think? I don't know the details either."

"In that case, I fear it's something related to the Onmyou legal reform."

"Eh?"

"Well, to the Onmyou Agency's position, the dark temple is a dark spot of the magic community."

If the Onmyou Agency's jurisdiction grew, it would catch the eyes of the people around it. They wanted to take the opportunity to reach an agreement now. The opinions in the monastery had probably disagreed on whether to accept that change or not, as well as over the monastery's future policy.

"....."

Akino looked uncertainly at Hokuto with a 'Eh? What's that?' expression.

Why did Hokuto know those things when she was only entering the monastery now? Even the seniors among the 'disciples' definitely wouldn't know what the priests talked about.

...This person.....

Who was she? The moment that thought flashed through her.

"...Ah." Hokuto stopped.

Akino reflexively looked up the steps along her gaze. "Aha." Then, she laughed quietly.

"That's our mountain gate."

The mountain gate was lined on either side by cedar forests and also had stone stairs leading to the mountaintop.

At first glance, an ancient, outdated gate towered over there.

A gate with a hip-and-gable roof[18] constructed out of two wooden structures and covered with faded tiles. It wasn't huge, but it had a great overbearing impression when it was suddenly seen in the mountains. It abruptly made the witness meld into the surrounding scenery.

It was like a judicator recognized by the mountain. Even without any words, it clearly proclaimed that starting there was divine territory.

"....."

Hokuto composed her expression.

".....There's a barrier put up on the edges of that gate."

"Ah, you already know? But it's alright. Because you can enter through the gate."

".....A magic I haven't seen..... Might this barrier cover the whole mountain from here?"

"Right. That's why you can only enter the monastery through this gate."

Seishuku Temple was near the mountaintop. So the temple's barrier surrounded the whole mountaintop. It was quite a large-scale barrier, and outsiders - of course, practitioner outsiders - were also very surprised at the start. But that barrier had always been up since before Akino had been born, and Akino didn't feel that it was very incredible. To Akino, it was just that kind of thing, nothing else.

"Anyway, let's go up. Because we're probably going to be late....."

Akino immediately walked up to the gate after saying that, and Hokuto followed right after her.

The interior of Seishuku Temple started after they passed through the gate. Even so, the surrounding scenery didn't change very quickly. Cedar forests still towered unchangingly around a continuous staircase laid with stone. Seishuku Temple was a mountain temple, and this sanghamara[19] was built along the mountain. The mountain gate was the formal entrance.

But even so, after they walked past the mountain gate for a while, they could see beech trees, wisteria[20], and crimson maple leaves along with the cedar trees.

Then, they could see several wooden structures on the other side of the trees - halls.

The stone steps turned into a shikyakumon[21] much smaller than the mountain gate and ended halfway through. Akino brought Hokuto over the stone steps and through the gate.

The two of them had managed to reach the place on this mountain that they had set out for.

It was a courtyard-like place surrounded by the mountain forests and halls. The rolling of the surface was also very gentle, and there were old lanterns placed everywhere.

"Alright, we're here."

Akino turned back to look at Hokuto. Hokuto stopped, casting a sharp glance around.

"The main hall is in front, and you can see the gathering hall across from it. The temples are there, and though you can't see from here, there are warehouses inside. Then there's the living quarters, and..... you can see the roof of the pagoda across the trees over there. There are a few other places inside the monastery like belfries, monk's quarters, and smaller halls..... those kinds of buildings."

Akino pointed them out as she explained, but she didn't know how much Hokuto heard. The girl who had called herself a water dragon living spirit narrowed her eyes wordlessly, staring attentively at the scenery in the monastery - and probably using her spiritual power to 'see'.

Akino's explanation ended abruptly after noticing that Hokuto was encircled by that cold atmosphere again. Akino had great difficulty speaking to Hokuto and stood there stupidly until the end.

But.

".....Akino. It seems like there's a racket over there."

"Eh? Hmm? It really does. What happened?"

Hokuto was talking about the gathering hall. Noisy voices were audibly pouring out from there.

"Let's go see", Hokuto said. She walked forward without waiting for a reply and Akino hastily chased after her.

There was probably a dispute going on in the gathering hall. After Hokuto and Akino walked closer, a monk walked out from the center. He walked towards the temple and stopped after noticing Hokuto and Akino.

It was Tadanori.

"Akino, it's this late already. What exactly were you doing?"

"S-Sorry I'm late! Um, Priest Kengyou brought a newcomer, and I already brought her over, um....."

A sharp warning as soon as they met. Akino instantly became timid. Tadanori moved his sharp gaze from Akino to Hokuto. Hokuto had her usual expressionless appearance as she quietly accepted Tadanori's gaze.

".....Hmm, so it's you? But it's not a good time right now. You can't enter the monastery as a newcomer right now."

"Eh? Um, Priest?"

"Akino. I still have other business that I have to attend to. Miss, as you see, we have some troubles to deal with."

Tadanori proclaimed selfishly, and then immediately ran towards the temple.

Hokuto, who had practically been abandoned, didn't say anything in particular, her gaze intently pursuing Tadanori's back. On the other hand, Akino was confused and clueless.

It was very evident that she had never been entrusted with doing anything like looking after a newcomer until now. Similarly, Akino felt completely unsuited to something like looking after a newcomer.

Eh? Ehh?

What exactly had happened. Then suddenly, Hokuto keenly looked back from next to her.

Akino also turned around to look.

"Oh, Akino, you've come back."

"Ah, Sen-jiichan."

Sen had approached them at some point. He spoke with the two of them as if he had been standing in front of the gathering hall for a while.

He still had his unchanging unconcerned attitude, as if the noisy monastery had nothing to do with him. Akino regained a bit of her calm in front of this never-changing Old Man Sen.

"A newcomer was going to enter the monastery, so I felt like I should come down for a welcome..... Is she the newcomer?"

"Yeah, she's Hokuto-san..... But rather than that, what's going on? What happened in the gathering hall?"

Akino asked with a frown, but Sen didn't become serious at all.

"Actually, it seems like they were contacted by Kengyou-sama just now."

He responded with that.

"Eh? He contacted them? What is it this time?"

"Nnn. It's not much. An envoy from the Onmyou Agency in Tokyo came today. That's why everyone's all aflutter. It's become as chaotic as a disturbed beehive."

Akino let out an "Eh" voice when she heard this unexpected reply.

She had just talked about the Onmyou Agency with Hokuto. Akino quickly looked at Hokuto, but Hokuto was maintaining her solemn expression, listening carefully to Sen's words.

Seeing that the two of them had nothing to ask, Sen laughed out loud while telling them about the situation in more detail.

"Also, I heard that the envoy is one of the famous Twelve Divine Generals, you know? What kind of abilities is he going to have? Oh my, it's so very interesting."

Chapter 2 - Visitors

Part 1

Seishuku Temple's gathering hall was an extremely spacious temple.

It was a flat wooden building. Acala was enshrined at the center of the wall inside and the other Buddhas were enshrined along the other walls. The afternoon sunlight slanted as it entered to illuminate the floor, but the enshrined Buddhas quietly gazed into the hall from the darkness.

The gathering hall had room for almost a hundred people, but right now there were only eight people here. These eight people were divided into three sides as they confronted each other.

There were three bald robed monks.

There was a scholarly man wearing a shirt and jeans, and a middle-aged woman wearing glasses.

Slightly farther away was a suit-wearing middle-aged man and a teenager. There was also a twenty-some year-old woman.

The last three people had come to visit the monastery. They were the envoys from the Onmyou Agency. The other five people were the leaders of the monastery, but they were split into two sides very strangely and glaring at each other in front of the guests.

"We reached this conclusion long ago."

One of the three monks said this. He was a man who gave off an especially overwhelming feeling, even among the three. Though he was past middle-aged, he still arrogantly looked down on the others.

"Why don't you face reality?"

The scholarly male said this, fearlessly meeting the pressuring gazes of the monks. The glasses-wearing woman next to him nodded approvingly while staying silent.

"If this goes on, the monastery will have nowhere to go sooner or later. It's clear as day. Though it's a monastery that's fallen behind the changes of the times, we'll be able to continue existing as long as we change form. Isn't there no other opportunity other than this?"

"Preposterous! The history of this monastery isn't something that the mere Onmyou Agency can compare to. Don't even mention accepting their authority."

"That's why I said, you're already outdated! This has nothing to do with long history in the first place. What's important is right now and the future!"

"The past and the future are all the same. This monastery has never changed since ancient times. No matter how this world changed."

"No, the monastery was only able to exist to today because it was constantly changing! Even if this is a large change that has never happened before, there's no need to be so scared of moving forward!"

"Your words are meaningless. These actions themselves are proof that your training is insufficient. There's no need to waste words with you anymore."

The arguments of the two sides went along two completely parallel lines[22] of thought. In contrast to the sternly and coldly standing monks, the scholarly man desperately held back his own anger.

"....."

One of the Onmyou Agency envoys was expressionless, another concealed a cold smile, and the other frowned while staring at the leaders of the monastery in irritation.

But the head monk also stared over at them.

"I've shown you Onmyouji something shameful. Please forgive the poor welcome of us monks."

"Don't worry, don't worry."

It was the suit-wearing middle-aged man watching the situation unfold who replied like this.

"We're not saying that your monastery has to come up with an answer right now. We've just come to bring a proposal to your monastery."

"I see. But it will be the same no matter how many times you come. I fear that we will be unable to do as you wish."

"Priest Jougen!"

The scholarly man ground his teeth and shouted. But the head monk no longer even looked at him.

"It's quite late. For now, our monks will prepare housing for you all tonight. But please be wary of disturbing our practice."

Only saying that much, he leisurely left with the other two monks as his robes flapped.

His lively movements made it impossible to estimate his age. The scholarly man and the woman standing next to him resentfully stared at the backs of the departing monks.

The frowning young woman sighed - secretly.

Not long afterwards, guides came to lead them to their rooms.

☆

"Though I already heard beforehand..... they really are a mess."

Yuge Mari straightforwardly expressed her feelings in the lounge of the living quarters they had been led to. She didn't hide her displeased tone, since there were only colleagues in the lounge.

Yuge was an Independent Exorcist belonging to the Onmyou Agency Exorcist Bureau.

She was a National First-Class Onmyouji holding the 'Onmyou First-Class' qualifications, as well as one of the so-called 'Twelve Divine Generals'. Though she was a first-rate barrier user with the strange nickname of 'Binding Princess', she had even gone to this kind of backcountry place because of a verbal order about a 'special mission'. The coat she wore earlier was left in her own room, so right now she was dressed in a jacket.

The living quarters and the monk's quarters looked relatively new for the monastery, like the added warehouse portions. But their design was pretty much the same as countryside hotels. Though it was fortunate that there was electricity, there was no heating, and the mountain chill seeped into the room. Though the monastery would have prepared a brazier for her if she just said the word, Yuge wasn't very confident that she could use a brazier so she had carefully refused.

What were generally called the 'living quarters' were probably lodgings where people wrote or meditated to purify their spirit and ate sophisticated, spiritual cuisine in the evening, a recreation that ought to be popular among women. Though that was just Yuge's personal opinion. But this time - though she had long since prepared herself for it - that impression became far removed. Because of work, Yuge had almost never left Tokyo. It might not be bad to take the trip as an opportunity to experience the feeling of traveling. Though she had thought this and had originally been looking forward to that, her expectations had easily crumbled - though she had long since prepared herself for it.

"Come to think of it, it's already pretty inexplicable that there's electricity here. I don't remember us seeing anything like power lines on the mountain road up here, right?"

"......On the neighboring mountain is a transmission line tower. It's drawn from there."

The person who replied to Yuge's question was a man sitting with his feet up in the lounge's wicker chair and reading a book.

He was about forty. His carefully arranged hair was mixed with a bit of white on the sides.

He was tall and lean, well-dressed in a double-breasted suit with a handkerchief stuck in his chest pocket. But his expression was poor and his face looked slightly displeased. Though he spoke smoothly, his tone was dim. He sounded like he was deliberately suppressing his tone, or rather like he was purely speaking in a businesslike manner.

Though he belonged to a different department than Yuge, he was also her senpai in the Exorcist Bureau. He was the Special Senser of the Intelligence Department, Miyoshi Tougo. He was also a National First-Class Onmyouji.

"Officer[23] Miyoshi, are you familiar with this monastery?"

"It's my first time here. Just like you. Though I heard rumors beforehand."

Miyoshi focused on the words in his book while replying without looking up. "I see." Yuge replied.

"It's quite a strange place. It looks like a big and impressive monastery from the scale of things..... But I never would have thought an outdated way of life like this would be able to persist till now."

"I see. Well, there's electricity and water here, and you can get phone reception. It's nothing to be shocked at, is it? Rather, isn't it quite nice to be able to be close to nature?"

"R-Really?"

"The air's extremely fresh too. It has a calm feeling of being distant from the hubbub of the city and troublesome civilization."

"......Hah."

Yuge smoothly minced her words, faced with a thought that she couldn't approve of for a while. Come to think of it, although Miyoshi usually spoke indifferently, it was hard to immediately tell how serious he was.

But Miyoshi lightly flipped the pages of the book,

"Of course, I can't say that it's calm after seeing its 'spiritual' aspect."

While adding that sentence.

This time Yuge also nodded in agreement. The mountain top territory of Seishuku Temple was enclosed in a giant barrier. Just that was probably already a large-scale magic. But it seemed that different barriers of various sizes were placed in other places as well. For example, there had been quite a tough permanent barrier set up at the gathering hall they had just been in. Perhaps that gathering hall was used as a 'magic practice field'. More importantly, it wasn't just barriers. Most of the people in the area were practitioners who could use first-class magic.

"Come to think of it, which sect did this monastery come from? Vajrayana? Or Shugendo?"

"Neopaganism."

"Eh?"

"More accurately, it was the Shingon Seishuku Temple. Like its name implies, it was originally a branch belonging to Shingon[24], but it became independent after the war. In other words, they're Shingon neopaganists. This is their home mountain."

Yuge's eyes widened in surprise. But Miyoshi unconcernedly continued reading his book.

"Hence, the look that this monastery gives off is very similar to Shingonism. But their doctrines and trivial rules and such can be thought of as things exclusive to Seishuku Temple. For example, didn't the ajari just now - those monks - call each other 'Priest'? Originally, Shingon monks ought to call each other 'Monk'. Though it looks very similar on the surface, the two are actually no longer the same.

Indeed, among the leaders that came to the monastery gathering hall just earlier, the other two in addition to the three robed monks had also been ajari. They had been called 'Priest' as well.

"Perhaps anyone whose power is recognized can obtain preaching empowerment[25] - though I'm not sure if that's the case, at least the system is that one can become an ajari. A kind of neopaganist ajari who constantly trains and learns magic in place of 'dharma', one faction of Seishuku Temple. That's what's going on."

"No, but..... If this monastery only rose as neopaganist after the war, then hasn't its history as the so-called dark temple started only recently? Judging from what the monk called Jougen said just now, this monastery seems to have an extremely long history....."

"This 'temple' was here since long ago. However, it's unsure whether it's been here for hundreds of years. Similarly, just like they said themselves, the monastery belongs to the Shingon faction but actually exists in the world as a 'dark temple'. As halls for 'magic' surpassing doctrines and sects. That kind of need exists regardless of the age."

"......I see....."

Yuge also knew that the dark temple was related to the magic community. Moreover, Yuge was also clear on the fact that the dark temple was a place that accepted practitioners who couldn't stay in society for various reasons. Seishuku Temple and its role as an independent temple for the darkness of the magic community were certain. At the same time, it was a 'necessary evil'.

Just then, Miyoshi and Yuge's conversation broke off.

Then,

"...Officer Miyoshi. Do you know of the other side's 'fighting power'?"

It was the young man who had been silent until now who asked this. Yuge glanced at him.

The young man stood a bit further away from the two of them, his back against a pillar.

He was a young man with a keen, intellectual attitude that made the word 'sharp' instantly emerge in one's mind. He was well-proportioned and had handsome features. But more important than that was his impressive, cold gaze.

In any case, one could tell that he was very capable with a single glance, and he was extremely domineering, vaunting his own ability rather than concealing it.

He was also very young. Yuge's recalled that he was only nineteen. Though he wore a suit like Miyoshi, what he wore was just a single-breasted suit, so it was a bit more casual. And he had already loosened his tie.

Yamashiro Hayato. He was a young National First-Class Onmyouji who had obtained 'Onmyou First-Class' qualifications this spring.

"It's enough if we have a rough estimate of their capability. Please let me hear your opinion. Because it might be 'useful' information later on."

Though Yamashiro's words were very polite, Yuge frowned slightly. The teenager's expression and voice became a bit strangely rude since they were tinged with excitement.

Even at Yamashiro's question, Miyoshi's gaze didn't leave his hands.

He just read his book while speaking to Yuge first.

"Yuge-shi. You have work to do."

"Eh? .....Ah, yeah."

Yuge realized Miyoshi's intent upon seeing him point to his ears with his index finger. She put up a barrier around them.

This was to eliminate any magical surveillance and eavesdropping from the outside. It was unclear whether it was because he hadn't considered that much or because he didn't think that doing this was necessary, but the questioning Yamashiro momentarily showed a displeased expression.

At that point, Miyoshi still hadn't lifted his head from his book for a moment.

"There are forty-two people around other than us. Among them, there are thirty-nine who can be identified as practitioners. Though there are several shikigami, I can't get any accurate numbers because high-level ones have stealth capabilities."

He indifferently reported like that.

Yuge's heart beat when she heard the words of the Special Senser. Miyoshi had instantly grasped the spiritual situation of Seishuku Temple in a place with so many barriers, and moreover in the lair of these practitioners whose friend-or-foe status couldn't be ascertained.

The people who could be appointed as Spirit Sensers were all people with especially outstanding spirit-sensing ability even among Onmyouji. Though an

exorcist like Yuge was recognized as a representative of modern Onmyouji, the position of Spirit Senser put more emphasis on innate ability - or in other words, on born talent. More importantly, he was a Spirit Senser who had obtained 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications, known as the Special Senser. That kind of person was an irreplaceable talent to the Exorcist Bureau.

There were only three Special Sensers in the Twelve Divine Generals who had obtained 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications. Among those three, it was undoubtedly Miyoshi with the nickname 'Divine Eye' who was the best among them in qualifications and power. Though outside knowledge of him was low, he was a secret powerhouse in the Exorcist Bureau.

"About forty practitioners..... Though they're still in training, it would be very tricky if they grouped together."

".....Anyway, aren't they just a mob? Rogue practitioners who haven't even received true training aren't worthy opponents no matter how many there are."

Yamashiro quickly shattered Yuge's worry. His voice didn't just reveal pure arrogance, as a calm, steady self-confidence based on knowledge could also be felt from it.

Yamashiro was a Mystical Investigator who had been assigned to the Onmyou Agency Mystical Crime Investigation Department right after he became a First-Class Onmyouji. Though Yamashiro didn't have any special abilities like Miyoshi, nor did he have a strong spiritual power or special techniques like Yuge, his ability in anti-personnel magic against practitioners was first-rate. Actually, he was treated as a promising future leader by the Onmyou Agency higher-ups.

But,

"Just in case, let me say a bit more."

Miyoshi supplemented with extremely businesslike words.

"There are also quite a few people who were born in independent temples like Seishuku Temple in the Onmyou Agency. They are especially numerous in the

Exorcist Bureau. Independent Officer Miyachi is one of them. Of more recent people, Independent Officer Kagami is as well. Though I remember that Kagami-shi was only born in an independent temple."

"Eh? The Director was that kind of person?"

"Oh my, you didn't know?"

She had never thought of that. Though Yuge's boss Miyachi had told her of this mission himself, he hadn't mentioned such a thing at all.

Another secret, just like before. Yuge momentarily became unreasonably angry as that bearded face emerged in her mind.

"I-In that case, why did Director Miyachi send me as an envoy? Isn't this place like the Director's old home, then?"

"He sent you because this was just to make a proposal. If we sent a negotiator who looked like he might burn the entire mountain down, wouldn't the monastery be unable to calm down?"

Miyoshi replied straightforwardly. But actually, he wasn't too sure why - or rather, he didn't feel any interest in it at all. One could also think that it was even less convenient because it was like his old home.

Even so, it was still maddening. Yuge frowned as if saying 'that beardy', but didn't give it voice.

On the other hand, the face of Yamashiro who had stayed calm and composed after hearing of the numbers turned sinister after he heard about the topic of peoples' origins.

"'Ogre Eater' was from a dark temple....."

After unconsciously murmuring like that, Yamashiro quickly came back to his senses and clicked his tongue after becoming aware of his own words. Though he instantly wiped off his expression, he was visibly more serious than before.

Miyoshi continued speaking in an indifferent tone.

"The dark temple's environment is overly cruel to a practitioner. But in comparison, there are often monsters born from there who are unbound by the common sense of the world. Everyone has their own opinion about environments that can make peoples' talents bloom like that."

"......That might not be certain. If there really was a practitioner on the level of Director here, it definitely would have reached our ears. Are there people on that kind of level in the current Seishuku Temple?"

"How should I put it? I'm not too sure about their skill levels. But at the least, the several ajari we met just now had quite the spiritual powers. Each one had a spiritual power that several ordinary exorcists wouldn't be able to match. Especially the man called Jougen. Though he might not be on Miyachi-shi's level, at least he's far superior to us. Of course, the comparison is just limited to spiritual power."

Yuge became speechless after hearing Miyoshi's opinion.

Indeed, she had felt that all of the monastery leaders who had gathered in the gathering hall were outstanding practitioners. But exorcists were elites even among professional Onmyouji. An assertion like several exorcists being unable to compare was impossible to believe instantly. Though a practitioner's excellence wasn't decided by strength or weakness of spiritual power, but it was the truth that spiritual power had a very important role in magical battles.

"But in the first place, if, more accurately, we're appraising 'fighting power', it's meaningless to just pay attention to the practitioner. This is their home[26]. There are a lot of things they can do, like sneak attacks while we're asleep or burning the place we're in. Yeah, there's also assassination with poison. In addition, there's....."

"Hey, Officer. Don't say such unlucky things, alright?"

Yuge put on a bitter face towards the calmly speaking Miyoshi.

Then, Miyoshi suddenly raised his head away from the book he had been reading and looked in the direction of the nearby Yamashiro.

"In any case, this mission is to 'advise' Seishuku Temple. Even if we can't convince them, we will not take any forceful measures. There's no need to be reckless."

Though his tone was businesslike as always, for now he seemed to be trying not to portray himself as lacking in force.

Yamashiro didn't reply yes or no. But he took on an extremely businesslike smile like Miyoshi's as a reply and moved away from the pillar he leaned on.

"I'm going to go walk around."

"Yamashiro."

"I know."

Yamashiro dealt with Yuge without thinking as he left the lounge.

Yuge sighed. Young people these days - though she thought that, Yuge instantly shook her head in a panic after realizing that those thoughts were like an old person's. Even her thoughts had started to become like those of an old person's after spending a life immersed in work every day. That was irritating.

".....It seems like Yamashiro-shi was the Kurahashi family protege."

Miyoshi murmured that sentence. At the same time, his gaze was still aimed in the direction Yamashiro had left.

"He was brought into the Kurahashi family's care during childhood and even received Chief Kurahashi's personal tutelage for a while."

"I heard something like that too. Well, the higher-ups are expected a lot from him, right? Though he talks and acts like a bigshot, he might feel unexpectedly stressed."

Come to think of it, his looming arrogance could also be forgiven. Rather, if she thought carefully, an arrogant kouhai was always much better than her colleague Kagami Reiji.

"His power is the real thing. Are we being too worried?"

Yuge smiled while summarizing things to Miyoshi. But Miyoshi casually lowered his head to read his book. Yuge unconsciously became irritated. Miyachi was like this too. It looked like men of this age - especially single ones - made her unsettled in the way they always went about their own ways.

"......Actually, what do you think, Officer Miyoshi? Do you think Seishuku Temple will accept the Agency - the Onmyou Agency's proposal?"

"Ah, I'm not sure."

"It's alright, just say what you think. For me, I feel like what that man who opposed the monk called Jougen in the gathering hall before - was he called Priest Rian? - was right. It's true that maybe the dark temple existed up to this point out of 'necessity', but the situation will change with the Onmyou law legal reform. The Onmyou Agency won't continue letting the dark temples be, and if the monastery continues their passively-resisting attitude like this, then we'll have to seriously contend with them. The monastery has no chance of victory no matter what if things become that way."

The proposal that Yuge and the others had made to Seishuku Temple this time was a contract to make the Seishuku Temple become an official 'practice ground' for the Onmyou Agency. Of course, needless to say this was just on the surface. It was a strategy to slowly turn Seishuku Temple into a division of the Onmyou Agency. Plainly put, it was an exhortation that they would overlook all of the assistance that Seishuku Temple had given to magic criminals in the past, and in return, Seishuku Temple would fall under the Onmyou Agency's management.

From a different point of view, it was a so-called 'surrender treaty'. But it did have safeguards for the people of the monastery. The people with power would be given qualifications as Onmyouji. No matter what had happened, the current

Seishuku Temple was legally a 'criminal organization', and that was the truth. To Yuge, the Onmyou Agency's proposal was already an exceptional discretionary favor.

But Miyoshi's opinion was slightly different.

"Even in front of matters of life and death, people can never make an objective and impartial judgment. Rather, it's even harder to make a suitable judgment in that kind of situation."

Was that the case? Yuge had trouble agreeing for a while and kept her own personal opinion.

In any case, Yuge and the others had only been ordered to advise them. No matter what outcomes would come of the choice the monastery made, they weren't the responsibility of Yuge and the others.

In that case, next was.....

".....What now? What do you plan on doing from now on?"

"Oh, what do you mean, from now on?"

"The other thing. The 'Tsuchimikado' business. When are we going to move?"

"....."

Miyoshi stopped reading his book, lifting his head.

Though his expression hadn't changed much, he rolled his eyes a few times - at least, that seemed to be what he was doing. Yuge didn't know what he meant at first, but her eyes widened after she realized.

".....Eh? Eh? Officer Miyoshi? Could it be that you've forgotten....."

"No way. I remember very clearly."

Miyoshi looked in a different direction while speaking assertively. Yuge felt irritated.

"In that case, why didn't you bring up that topic from the beginning in our meeting before?"

"Well..... isn't it obvious? It's because it wasn't the time to talk about that topic. In any case, they started the infighting on their own."

Though that was reasonable for now, Yuge still shot him a barefaced suspicious gaze. Miyoshi didn't look at his colleague, pretending to cough.

Yuge and the others had another mission this time other than conveying the Onmyou Agency's proposal to Seishuku Temple.

That was regarding the information they had gathered about Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Tsuchimikado Harutora was a boy born in the Tsuchimikado branch family, a famous Onmyoudou family. He had originally been an inexperienced Onmyouji studying at the Onmyou Academy Onmyouji training institute, or in other words, just a student.

But last summer, after the trigger of a certain event, he had suddenly raised a banner of resistance against the Onmyou Agency.

He had raised a commotion in the agency building where he had been in custody, and then vanished while hiding himself. Afterwards, he had led to various incidents and opposed the Onmyou Agency in Tokyo. Moreover, he was suspected of casting forbidden magic not long after he vanished. Soon afterwards arose voices of a group that wanted to treat him as a terrorist.

But if those were the only accusations, the problem of Tsuchimikado Harutora would just be within the jurisdiction of the Mystical Investigators.

Actually, it was the Mystical Investigators who were tracing his whereabouts.

But in addition to the Mystical Investigators, the Onmyou Agency higher-ups - no, the entire magic world - also had to pay attention to Tsuchimikado Harutora because of a certain matter.

The rumor that Tsuchimikado Harutora was 'Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation' had spread everywhere as if it were the truth.

Moreover, even worse, the believability of this rumor was 'very high'.

For example, the incident during the summer of last year that had become the trigger for Harutora's disappearance. The cause of that incident was a manmade shikigami called the Raven's Wing that had been designated as a forbidden magical tool. It was also said that a mere student had changed so drastically because he had been possessed by the Raven's Wing. But the Raven's Wing was originally a magical tool created by Yakou. It wasn't too much of a leap to think that Tsuchimikado Harutora had 'awakened' as Tsuchimikado Yakou because of the effects of the Raven's Wing.

More importantly, the even larger problem was that after his disappearance last year, Tsuchimikado Harutora had appeared in front of the Onmyou Agency doors, and at the time, two shikigami had been confirmed by his side.

They were the two legendary shikigami that Yakou had once controlled, Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

Of course, it wasn't to say that was already certain. But it was a doubtless fact that the two shikigami were extremely powerful individuals and that one of them had been a 'one-armed oni' like the legends that they had received reports about before. The fact that Tsuchimikado Harutora brought around those two powerful servant shikigami - defensive shikigami - was a huge driving force further propelling the rumor that he was Yakou's reincarnation.

The rumor that Tsuchimikado Yakou would reincarnate into the bloodline of his descendants had already been spread for ten years. The Twin-Horned Syndicate secret society formed by Yakou fanatics had also tried to come in contact with Tsuchimikado family members before to spur on Yakou's awakening. Although

the Mystical Investigators had cleaned out the Twin-Horned Syndicate afterwards, the rumors surrounding Yakou's reincarnation hadn't vanished.

Tsuchimikado Harutora was currently continuing to lay low in order to avoid the Mystical Investigators' pursuit.

And this Seishuku Temple, the 'underground' of the magic community - was a gathering place for information. It was highly probable that they could pick up clues related to the still-fleeing Tsuchimikado Harutora.

This was another mission that Yuge and the others had been assigned.

"Well, if you really have to say, this mission was just incidental, but it's certainly a mission although it is incidental. Officer Miyoshi, I'd be very troubled if you didn't do your job properly as our representative."

"That's why I said, I didn't actually forget. First off, this isn't something we can ask to their face. Because it's a touchy topic. We need to carefully observe the situation while considering the other party's attitude."

"Why?"

"Does that need explanation? Because the dark temple is connected to Yakou."

She truly hadn't thought of that. But considering what had happened before, she really couldn't believe it immediately. Yuge looked at him silently, but Miyoshi just helplessly closed his book.

"Yuge-shi, how much do you know about the principal deity of Seishuku Temple?"

"I don't know much..... You aren't saying that it's Yakou, are you?"

"Though you're not right, that's not too far off."

"Please don't joke around."

"I'm not joking with you. I went over and had a glance secretly, and the board installed in the main hall here reads 'Hall of Magic'. Even the main deity in the temple is a guardian god of magic - Myouken Bodhisattva[27]. Though he's called a bodhisattva, he's actually a deva[28] and was also called the North Star Deity."

"I know that much. The Myouken bodhisattva was called the deification of the North Star--"

Yuge shut her mouth right there.

Tsuchimikado Yakou was called the 'North Star King' by his worshippers. The North Star referred to Polaris. Yakou was figuratively honored as such for his importance with regard to Onmyoudou.[29]

"......Isn't that just a coincidence? Didn't the dark temple have hundreds of years of history, making it more ancient than Yakou? Or did it change its principal deity during Yakou's time?"

"Incorrect. The mountain the Seishuku Temple is on was originally called the 'North Star Mountain'. It's doubtless that it was seen as a place to worship the Myouken bodhisattva since ancient times."

"Then what?"

"It's just the opposite."

"Hah?"

"It's said that it was this Seishuku Temple that used the 'North Star King' metaphor for their principal deity as Yakou's nickname."

"...!"

Yuge stared at Miyoshi incredulously. Though Miyoshi's attitude was just like always, she didn't feel like he was lying.

"Didn't I say? Yakou's connected to this monastery. Well, it also has relations to his defensive shikigami as well as his name. But in any case, although the records

are very vague, it's believed that he obtained a lot of help from Seishuku Temple when he established Imperial Onmyoudou at the military's request."

"That Yakou?"

"Yes. I've said it before, it's because this place has existed as halls of 'magic' that 'surpass doctrines and sects' since ancient times.

Yuge groaned upon hearing Miyoshi's explanation.

Though the General Onmyoudou that the Onmyou Agency currently used was Onmyoudou, it was actually a magic that roped in a large amount of magic used in other religions. It was because the Imperial Onmyoudou that had been used as the basis of General Onmyoudou had been an enormous system of magic, that had been established by including all of Japan's various magics and superhuman powers at the time.

In that case, it was impossible to imagine that Yakou, who had established such a system of magic, had been unrelated to the dark temple where various kinds of practitioners gathered.

"Originally, worship of the North Star was a unique faith that could be seen in Babylon, India, and China. As the symbol of the North Star, the Myouken bodhisattva was not only related to the Seishuku Temple, it also had deep relationships with Onmyoudou, Sukuyoudou[30], Vajrayana, Taoism, and more recently Nichiren. Though I can't imagine how exactly it became the principal deity of the dark temple, it's indeed a suitable principal deity to be worshipped in a monastery where practitioners of different backgrounds gather. Moreover, in the age that Yakou established Imperial Onmyoudou, the ajari in the monastery who knew of his ability all couldn't help but praise him as the incarnation of their principal deity..... Well, that was just an old rumor."

"....."

"But putting aside the origins of the name 'North Star King' for now, at the least, Yakou has worked together with the dark temple before, that's absolutely certain. I don't think this kind of place would honestly answer us if we came to ask them

for information regarding the rumored reincarnation of Yakou as the people who issued an arrest order for Harutora. Hence, we have to carefully observe the situation while considering their attitude."

Miyoshi restated the same conclusion again, opening his book and starting to read.

Yuge sank into thought.

If what Miyoshi said was true, then it was possible that Seishuku Temple was in the 'Yakou faction'. But Tsuchimikado Harutora, who was viewed as Yakou's reincarnation, was currently waging war against the Onmyou Agency.

Then if they were reckless, they might cause Seishuku Temple to move to Tsuchimikado Harutora - that kind of development was very possible.

"......Honestly."

Miyoshi suddenly murmured that word. Yuge, whose attention was absorbed by a new possibility, unconsciously replied to him with an inquisitive "Eh?".

"Right when we got here. For an instant I thought we 'found him'..... But it looks like 'that' wasn't him. Well, whatever. 'That' seems more like a reforged[31] soul than a reincarnation....."

What was he saying? Yuge silently looked at Miyoshi.

The Special Senser stayed staring at the book in his hands. But Yuge noticed that the focus of his gaze was slightly off.

"......Also, it seems like it's sealing something..... No, it's keeping something maintained..... Is that the only way it's able to 'stay alive'? It feels too unnatural for anything someone in the monastery would do..... More importantly, I don't think the higher-ups would fail to notice forbidden magic of such a level. Then....."

Miyoshi had already started talking to himself at some point. Yuge troubled herself over whether to speak up or not. But it really was an incredibly curious monologue.

"Officer Miyoshi? What have you been saying since just now?"

Miyoshi closed an eye when Yuge spoke up to ask. He replied "It's nothing....." while shaking a head as if it were nothing at all, continuing to read his book.

"I was a bit interested because there was someone 'dead' here. As expected of a place like this monastery."

Part 2

The air in the monastery was still tense even after 'slop' ended. The restless and tense feeling that had gathered seemed to be on the edge of eruption- but it was forcefully stuck in the state right before an imminent explosion rather than truly exploding.

Akino, who had been told to look after Hokuto, had stayed with her for the rest time after that. They had prepared lunch, helped with the monastery chores, prepared 'slop', and helped with more monastery chores. During that time, the tense atmosphere of the monastery reached its peak when Onmyou Agency envoys arrived. However, Akino was unconcerned about those circumstances, making it through to the night by single-mindedly focusing on doing her own work.

The place Akino usually slept was a residential area of the monastery. It was the female quarters for 'disciples'. Though there were other rooms for women, Akino and two young seniors lived together in this six-tatami room.

But the two seniors reacted negatively to Akino for bringing back Hokuto.

"This place is too cramped for four people to live in."

"What is that Tadanori doing?"

They had no choice if it was an instruction handed down from above, but it made her regretful to suddenly restrict her seniors' living space because of the newcomer she had brought back. Though Tadanori said that he had already brought it up with them, the seniors insisted that they hadn't even heard of this.

As a result, Hokuto could only sleep in the bedding storage room tonight.

"Even so, you didn't need to accompany me, Akino."

"B-But, I couldn't convince the seniors, and I was asked to look after Hokuto."

Akino spoke in a fluster to the wryly-smiling Hokuto.

The bedding room was several times larger than the female living quarters from before. But the faded tatami was mostly occupied by piled bedding. Because it was a south-facing room that the sunlight didn't reach, there was dust everywhere and it was a bit musty. But more importantly, it was inconvenient that there was no light. Akino had brought a candle used for ceremonies from a storage room - secretly - and lit the small candle with a match.

The light that flickered in the darkness illuminated the bedding room and the two girls in it. Though it was completely dark compared to the lighting in the female quarters, in contrast her mood became happy because the low light could conceal extraneous things.

But because it was a narrow space occupied by sheets, the aroma that Hokuto's body gave off felt even closer to her. It was as if she were feeling her body heat. Her heartbeat was a bit restless.

"Sorry for troubling you."

"Ehh? No, it's not like that! It's not Hokuto's fault. Please don't be concerned. I never really hated this room. Even when I was by myself, I would come here to sleep sometimes."

"Eh? Why?"

"Um..... Well, like when certain things happened....."

To be more specific, the so-called 'certain things' were when her seniors scolded her, but it was too shameful to explain this to the newcomer Hokuto. The lenses of her glasses reflected the light of the candle, and Akino forcefully stopped the discussion as if saying 'please don't worry!'.

"Actually, I should be the one apologizing. It's your first day after entering the monastery and I made you run into this kind of thing....."

"That's not Akino's fault. Rather, it's fortunate that I was able to mix in with the monastery during the hubbub."

"Eh? Why is that?"

"Ah, uhh..... Because I don't really want attention."

Hokuto smiled awkwardly as she said that.

Come to think of it, when she had met Akino for the first time, Hokuto's attitude had been very forced.

Perhaps Hokuto was unexpectedly shy. For some reason, she was flooded by a sense of closeness.

".....Hmm? But I heard that you talked pretty actively with others when we were working."

Indeed, that had been when they were preparing 'slop'. Because the monastery had been all panicked, Akino had ended up being unable to introduce Hokuto to everyone around them. In contrast, Hokuto had been scolded fiercely for asking endless questions of the people in the monastery and others ended up avoiding her.

Hokuto had enthusiastically asked about the envoys from the Onmyou Agency - the Twelve Divine Generals.

"Sorry. Um..... It's because I had to check who came no matter what."

"Ah, you don't have to apologize for that....."

The Twelve Divine Generals of the Onmyou Agency were the stars of the magic community. It was understandable that she was interested, but she didn't really understand what she meant by 'checking'.

"Um, did you figure out who they were?"

"Yeah. Judging by what I heard, it seems like one of them is a Special Senser. The other one is a female Independent Officer named Yuge. The last one is the person who just became a National First-Class Onmyouji recently..... Anyway, I'm relieved."

"Relieved?"

"Ah, no. Um..... I should say it's fortunate that it's no one I recognize....."

Hokuto lowered her head with a relieved expression as she spoke. Akino was stunned. Since they were from the Twelve Divine Generals, then she should be happy if someone she knew came, but that didn't seem to be the case for Hokuto.

"Well, um, although Hokuto wasn't very lucky today, I think those people will go back very soon. In that case, I think Priest Tadanori will go back to managing the monastery and the chores and allocation and things. Of course, there's also the practice."

".....Yeah."

Though Hokuto nodded after hearing Akino's words, Akino couldn't see her expression clearly since it was too dark. But that was enough. It wasn't always right to see everything clearly.

After that, the two of them chose places that looked decent among the piled blankets and then laid down in the narrow space.

Akino would normally be unable to settle down because of a sense of distance, but she had shared a room with Hokuto in the Front Hall yesterday. Even compared to that time, the sense of distance had greatly receded. Actually, sleeping pillow to pillow like this made her happy. Though they had been kicked out of the female quarters, she was thankful to her two seniors tonight.

"Ah, right. We have to get up at four tomorrow. Though it's a bit early, will you be alright?"

"Hmm? Wasn't it Akino who overslept today?"

"T-That was!? I accidentally, um..... i-it was because I wasn't used to the place."

"Usually you wouldn't be able to sleep if you weren't used to the place."

"Th-That's not true! It was just a coincidence this morning..... I was just unlucky!?"

Akino replied with a blush to Hokuto's teasing tone. But inexplicably, she didn't feel uncomfortable even though she was clearly being teased. Though she felt a bit embarrassed, she didn't hate it.

"H-Hokuto too. At the start, weren't you completely silent while wearing that unhappy expression?"

"Did that happen?"

"Ah, how shameless. You can't remember things about yourself."

"I was so surprised by the fact that Akino ate four bowls of cup ramen that I wasn't able to talk with you."

"I-I didn't even eat four bowls. It was only three!"

"I didn't see you as a glutton."

"I-I was just hungry. Hokuto, you just don't know that you can't eat things like cup ramen whenever you want here."

Akino desperately protested. But Akino herself knew that there was a smile on her face as she protested. Hokuto was the same. In the faint light, she said bullying words while showing a mischievous smile. Her gaze was so familiar and so gentle that she gradually became embarrassed. Her heart itched and she became happy. This was her first experience.

As they changed into their sleeping clothes while sitting on the spread sheets, at some point the two of them started chattering in lowered voices while constantly laughing.

She was extremely delighted. And it made her happy. Hateful things and difficult things all instantly became needless to worry about. What was up with this? It was truly strange - it felt curious.

"Really. We have to get up early tomorrow, but isn't it Hokuto's fault that we won't be able to sleep?"

"It's my fault?"

"It's because you said weird things, Hokuto. I didn't think you would be this kind of person yesterday."

"Hmph. I thought so too."

"Eh?"

"I never thought that I would be able to laugh like this after coming to the dark temple. I haven't laughed like this in a long time in the first place. Honestly, how long has it been?"

"....."

Akino didn't respond to Hokuto’s words as she seemed to be talking to herself. She held her knees and curled into a ball while watching Hokuto.

Like that, she suddenly saw Hokuto stop smiling and look calmly at Akino.

"It was great that Akino was the first person I met when I came here. Thanks."

She said that straightforwardly and without being overly polite.

For a moment, Akino couldn't respond. Her cheeks just gradually heated up. Though she opened her mouth as if to say something, she couldn't say anything other than strange sounds like 'um' and 'aah', so she hastily closed her mouth.

Then, she lowered her head again.

But the one thing she was certain of was that she felt the same way.

It was great that Hokuto had been the newcomer who came to the monastery. Akino raised her head with a blush, wanting to at least convey that fact. She looked through her glasses that had slipped slightly because she had lowered her head towards Hokuto's face.

Hokuto suddenly froze.

"Um". Akino stared at Hokuto. Hokuto also stared at Akino..... But their gazes didn't meet. Hokuto stared at Akino's 'head', dumbstruck.

She wailed.

"Ah! Eek! D-Don't look!"

Though she frantically raised her hands, she was already a step late. Her fingertips touched and felt that sensation. Ears. Hateful rabbit ears that had jumped out. It looked like they had unexpectedly popped out because her emotions had been too intense. Though it would be fine if she dematerialized them immediately, she couldn't do it since she was too fretful.

Akino kept her hands raised with an almost-crying expression and was more or less able to block her ears that way.

On the other hand, Hokuto still stared at Akino and her ears in disbelief.

Her ears twitched. Though she hadn't intended it, unfortunately it seemed that they were conscious that they had been seen. Her ears moved by themselves. As

if to express Akino's feelings, the rabbit ears on her head twitched around and changed their direction bit by bit.

Then, Hokuto's eyes widen.

"......So..."

"......!?"

"So cute....."

"......Eh?"

Akino's ears reacted sharply.

Hokuto kept staring intently at Akino's ears with a serious gaze, and then blinked.

"What? Rabbit living spirits grow cute ears like that?"

"W-Who knows, um, well..."

"Though Kon's ears were also very cute..... But to think rabbit ears are this cute. They're quite expressive..... Ah, they moved again."

"......Kon?"

One ear jumped in surprise. Though Akino quietly asked back, Hokuto didn't notice it. In contrast, she unconsciously drew closer with an extremely moved appearance.

"Uhm, can they hear sound?"

"Eh? Th-They can't really..... Rather than sound, they make it easier to sense presences."

"I see. Since they're spiritual, I guess it's closer to 'sight'[32]. Then can you move them yourself?"

"Um, t-to a certain extent....."

Akino helplessly lowered her hands upon facing that look that were instantly filled with anticipation.

She held her knees and curled into a ball again. She adjusted her glasses and looked up as if trying to see her own forehead.

The ears that were currently bent into a '〈' character jumped and flopped to the right. Then, they jumped again and moved in the opposite direction.

With an 'ooh', Hokuto's eyes became red-tinged.

"That's really..... so cute."

"....."

"Can I touch them?"

"Ueeh!?"

"Ah, it's fine if you don't want that--"

"No no, it's not that I don't want it..... you can t-touch them..... uuuu..... J-Just for a bit....."

Akino hesitated, deeply blushing, and ended up lowering her head, sticking her ears forward.

Hokuto softly extended her hand.

Her fingertips touched. Akino couldn't help but shut her eyes with an "ah". An unimaginable feeling of her ears being touched. Though she couldn't keep her ears from moving as if to twist themselves, Hokuto kept stroking her rabbit ears with her slender fingers. It was as if she were addicted to the gentle feeling of that fur.

"So cute..... How should I put it? They are a reflection of Akino's personality, right?"

"Wh-What does that mean?"

"Doesn’t Akino-san behave like a rabbit in some ways?"

"Ehh?"

"You're timid in front of people but you're also a glutton, and you're a bit panicked but unexpectedly leisurely."

"Ah, that's what you meant." She couldn't deny it. In the end, her crooked ears dropped down listlessly. Thinking that she was unhappy, Hokuto said "Ah, sorry" while hastily pulling her hand away.

"That was rude of me. But it's truly very cute and suits you very well. Also, they're extremely pretty now that I've looked at them closely. Rather than being white, their fur is more of a whitish silver."

Hokuto wasn't just being polite. Though she realized this, Akino still had complex feelings. After all, these were at the roots of her inferiority complex.

"Why do you usually hide them?"

"Because..... it's terrible to have these things on my head. Because everyone takes me for an idiot....."

"Terrible, huh?"

Though Hokuto responded with a surprised face, she didn't express opposition or agreement like before when she saw Akino's stubborn expression.

But,

"I like Akino's ears very much."

"....."

Stunned, Akino buried her face into her knees. She desperately tried to conceal her expression like that. In contrast, the rabbit ears on her head jumped up

happily after pausing for a moment. How embarrassing! She ended up not being able to raise her head back up.

But Akino's jumping ears suddenly stopped.

Her ears changed direction in the blink of an eye. In the direction of the sliding door separating the bedding room and the corridor. Then, Hokuto seemed to notice as well, her body tensed up in an instant.

"Who is it--"

"Ah, i-it's alright. It's probably Tengu-san."

At a loss, Hokuto asked, "Tengu-san?" Then, the door to the bedding room was pulled open with a clatter.

The light in the corridor had already vanished. A giant figure quietly entered from the deep darkness that the light of the candle didn't illuminate.

It was a huge man.

His chest was very thick and his arms were thick and long like tree trunks. Though he was quite tall, he was so broad-shouldered and solidly built that it seemed to make his back hunch. Hence, his profile looked more like a gorilla than a human.

Though he had that abnormal body, his clothes were more eye-catching. The man wore a formal monk's robe, but there was a headpiece tied around his head, a majestic tengu mask.

He was such a huge man, but his footsteps didn't make any sound at all. No, that was also obvious.

"...A shikigami?"

"Yes."

Akino replied to Hokuto's suspicion.

Upon careful inspection, the shikigami wearing a Tengu mask carried a load of sheets over his shoulder. He didn't even glance at Akino and Hokuto who were preparing to sleep in this kind of place, moving into the depths of the room. Then, he placed the sheets over his shoulder on the piled sheets.

".....A high-level manmade shikigami? Whose is it? Is it a shikigami of a monk here?'

"Ah, no, he's wild."

Hokuto made a shameful "Hah?" sound upon hearing Akino's reply.

"Wild? W-Wild....."

"In other words, he's no one's. He's just a shikigami-san who's always lived at the monastery."

"Ahh, so you mean he serves Seishuku Temple..... But even so, there's no reason for him to have no master."

"Even if you say that..... Well, if you had to say, 'everyone's his master', I guess? He'll do whatever anyone asks of him as long as it's something he can do. He's very strong, so he's a lot of help."

"....."

Hokuto still frowned as if unable to accept it. On the other hand, the tengu-mask-wearing shikigami slowly turned around after piling up the sheets he had carried over and went towards the door.

He was doing chores alone, even while everyone in the monastery was sleeping. Akino said "Thanks for your work" to the broad back.

Immediately afterwards, the shikigami stopped. Instantly, it turned around, the tengu mask facing Akino and Hokuto. "Hmm?" Akino was taken aback.

Then,

"Dead person is here."

A low voice came from inside the tengu mask.

Akino's eyes widened.

"Dead person can move, interesting."

Akino's rabbit ears froze. She felt shocked from the bottom of her heart.

Afterwards, the shikigami walked forward again, shuffling from the room into the corridor. The sliding door was closed with a clatter. Akino's ears were still stiff.

"......Ahh, he scared me."

She only managed to let out a breath a while later.

"It's the first time I've heard Tengu-san say something..... I guess Tengu-san talks."

Even her seniors definitely didn't know that the tengu shikigami could talk. This time even Sen would have to come ask her to learn about it. Or maybe Sen already knew? She was a bit excited in her shock.

In any case, she had come across a rare occasion.

"How incredible. Hey, Hokuto. Tengu-san normally doesn't say anything at all! I wonder what's up today. Hokuto, you heard him too, right? Right?'

Akino excitedly turned towards Hokuto.

But Hokuto's face was pale.

"Eh? Ah, Hokuto, you were frightened too, right? It's alright. Though he looks very scary, he doesn't do scary things."

Akino hastily explained about the shikigami as if to comfort Hokuto. But she inadvertently had a suspicion.

When the shikigami had entered the room just now, Hokuto hadn't been scared although she had been nervous. She couldn't have been frightened by the fact that he had spoken either. Because in any case, this was Hokuto's first time meeting him. In that case, why was the blood drained from Hokuto's face?

Right. Akino finally thought of it.

The shikigami had said those words when he had looked at them - Akino and Hokuto.

Dead person is here.

"......Eh?"

Dead person?

Hokuto bit her lip silently and her body stiffened. That expression was even harsher and colder than during first time she had met her.

Suddenly, a vague feeling of coldness welled up on Akino's back.

The aroma of incense that came from Hokuto's body still floated in the middle of the room.

☆

When a nighttime monastery was mentioned, one would think of a silent environment with no sound at all. But it seemed like Seishuku Temple wasn't like this.

The sound of insects could be heard everywhere along with the cries of wild beasts that came from the dark mountains. These sounds of nature could only be heard because the activities of humans had ceased. Moreover, though he had long since prepared himself to face complete blackness, there were actually lit stone

lanterns dotting the area, and hence there was basically no problem moving around the monastery.

Perhaps he should say as expected of the dark temple. The lit fires were magical fires.

Yamashiro walked out of the room allocated to him and left the building to go deep into the monastery. Needless to say, he was obviously stealthed. He cautiously paid attention to the surroundings while pushing aside the tree branches and quickly striding into the cedar forest.

The training practitioners called 'disciples' in Seishuku Temple probably lived in the general quarters. But the people who had become 'ajari' seemed to be given large rooms or huts, also called 'monk's quarters'.

But that wasn't to say that every person had their own room. Rather, several people used one monk's quarter, using a single room as a den.

What a simple life. It would be reasonable for someone who felt confident in his power to be dissatisfied with the treatment in the monastery.

The person he was going to meet was someone who held such dissatisfaction.

Seeing the light of his destination deep in the forest, Yamashiro stopped.

The light that flickered through the shade of the mountain forest came from the monk's quarters. Yamashiro snorted.

"......Why don't you show yourself? Or are you saying that it's fine if I break in like this?"

It was unclear who he was talking to, but immediately afterwards the space before him wavered slightly. A barrier was hastily being released.

Could it be that they wanted to confirm his power? Though it was laughable, there was no meaning in reading into the other side's thoughts for every little

thing - or rather, the other side wasn't important enough for him to do so. Yamashiro strode forward with an indifferent attitude.

This monk's quarter looked on the outside like a hermitage. He stood in front of the entrance. The door opened as if it had been waiting and a woman's face peeked out. She was the glasses-wearing middle-aged woman that he had seen in the gathering hall during the day.

"Sorry for earlier."

"....."

He knew from just seeing the aura. This woman had put up that barrier from before. The woman invited Yamashiro in with an awkward expression, then closed the door of the monk's quarter.

Though it was an ancient building like he thought, there was still electricity. He took off his shoes and passed through the hall following the woman's lead.

He arrived at an inner room.

"I've made you wait, Priest Rian."

"Ah, I've been waiting for you, Yamashiro-kun."

The one in the room was the scholarly man who had fought with Jougen in the fathering hall, Rian.

Though it was a traditional room about eight tatami large, there was a table and bookshelves were placed by the walls, so it looked like it was used as a library. Rian rose from his seat, signaling with his gaze to the woman who had led him here. The woman quickly withdrew from the room, shutting the sliding door.

This room looked like Rian's den. Refusing the chair that the ajari offered, Yamashiro put his hand in his suit pocket. He took out a sealed letter. Rian's face lit up when he saw it.

"That's from Chief Kurahashi....."

"Yes. I was instructed to secretly bring it to you, which is why I am here."

Rian jumped to accept the letter that Yamashiro offered. He opened the seal, reading the letter inside as if wolfing it down. Yamashiro glanced to confirm his appearance and then observed the room while smiling.

A laptop was opened on the desk facing the window. There was also a calculator and a tablet. There was a small LCD television by the side. It felt like the table of someone in this backwards mountain world who was incredibly jealous of the outside world.

Moving his gaze to the bookshelves, he was able to see religious and magic texts mixed together along with new-looking books on business. There were wine bottles arranged inside the glass doors. There were many kinds, but they were all high-priced goods. This man was totally easy to see through. Conscious of this fact, Yamashiro's smile became cold.

".....Not a bad collection."

"Eh? .....Ah, yeah. Want a glass?"

A flattered expression emerged on Rian and he opened the glass door and took out a brandy.

"Is this the so-called 'hannyatou'[33]?"

"Hmph. There are practically no religious restrictions in this place. More importantly, it's nothing important anyway."

"Indeed. Though it's very impolite, I was quite surprised when I came here. I never thought you would be living such an outdated life."

"It's not like I enjoy it. You might not know that things like 'conventionalism' are a kind of powerful 'magic' of their own. They bind people's hearts with no regard for magical resistance."

".....What if there were a 'spell' that could destroy it?"

"Hmm. Well, about that. For example, there's this."

Saying that, Rian waved the letter in his hands.

Then, he took out a glass cup and opened the bottle of brandy. The scent of brandy floated through the room with a cheerful popping sound.

"Come to think of it, I did all this for the express purpose of activating that 'spell'. The Onmyou Agency is actually able to break Seishuku Temple's seal - the curse of conventionalism. Or in other words, it's its leader, His Excellency Kurahashi Genji."

"......In that case, I'm just a means that the Chief is using, right?"

"That's correct."

Rian smiled while offering him a glass cup filled with brandy. Yamashiro respectfully - on the surface - accepted it.

"To Seishuku Temple's future and the prosperity of the Onmyou Agency."

Rian spoke while raising his glass. It was probably for his own future and prosperity, Yamashiro mocked in his heart while silently raising his glass.

Yamashiro had met this man called Rian in the gathering hall not long ago for the first time. But he had already communicated with him through mail several times.

Originally, before Yamashiro and the others had been sent as envoys of the Onmyou Agency, Seishuku Temple had already split into two factions, the conservative faction and the reformist faction, and begun opposing each other. This conflict had become especially intense since the final stage of the Onmyou law legal reform last year.

The Onmyou law of the past had strict rules regarding the scope of authority and duties of Onmyouji - or practitioners. To take it to the extreme, Onmyouji duties were limited to just purifying the many spiritual disasters within Tokyo and dealing with magical crimes related to practitioners, and for this they had

permission to use magic. Though so-called spiritual treatment was an exception, in the first place this was just in order to treat spiritual encumbrance that was caused by spiritual disasters.

But that Onmyou law was being reformed on a large scale. A large portion of the regulations towards Onmyouji and magic were being lifted. Though it hadn't actually come into effect now, it was anticipated that future Onmyouji activity would spread into various areas.

Among the Seishuku Temple inhabitants, the reformist faction became greatly excited upon learning of this legal reform. It was currently a great opportunity to utilize the great opportunity of the legal reform and use it as a trigger to abandon their illegal background and move to the outside world. Advocates of that became increasingly louder and louder.

The reformists were composed of young practitioners dissatisfied with life in the monastery. It was the Rian before him who had become their core person.

Rian had secretly kept contact with the Onmyou Agency, asking the Onmyou Agency for support for the purpose of reforming Seishuku Temple. It was practically an action of betrayal for the 'dark temple' that lived on illegal activity. But it had been worthwhile, as Rian had succeeded in laying down a secret agreement with the Onmyou Agency higher-ups. Even Miyoshi and Yuge who were also envoys didn't know of that matter. This was a fact that only the Mystical Investigator Yamashiro knew.

Rian sat back on his chair, looking over the letter again.

".....Thank you so much. Everyone's moral will rise this time."

"....."

Yamashiro still stood motionlessly, silently bringing the glass to his lips.

Rian and the others desired the outside world.

But they didn't leave the monastery of their own initiative because they didn't know how to live outside the monastery. Moreover, they weren't resolved to give up their positions as ajari to live on as a mere practitioner - or even a practitioner without qualifications. This actually was no simple matter. People who grew up in the monastery would have great difficulty living outside the monastery. Hence, they specifically wished for the monastery to open itself up.

In the letter that Yamashiro had handed over, it had been written that the treatment of all of the people Rian counted as reformists would be guaranteed in the Onmyou Agency Chief's name. This was the secret agreement that Rian and Kurahashi had made. The item of Rian's personal treatment had been explained in a specifically-prepared letter.

That secret letter had been prepared 'just for him'.

"Anyway, you've worked hard, Yamashiro-kun. I hope that you could say hello to the Chief for me after you return. The opening of the monastery isn't so far away anymore."

Yamashiro couldn't help but want to click his tongue again upon seeing Rian smiling and pretending to be tough.

"Not so far away anymore? What are you saying so casually here, Priest?"

His tone changed slightly, becoming sharp and critical. "W-What?" Rian flinched as if he had been hit.

"It's already been half a year since you contacted the Onmyou Agency. We've come to Seishuku Temple to visit you, but I haven't seen any developments at all. What did you say again? The internal monastery adjustments would be carried out easily as long as you had the backing of the Onmyou Agency. Let me see the reforms you're bringing about, or....."

"Th-That's..... There are various situations on this side. Even so, we're still getting ready to advance."

"And the result was the dispute during the day? No, that doesn't even count as a dispute. Priest Jougen's faction doesn't even treat you like an opponent, right? Also, actually, the results of your 'getting ready' haven't changed the situation at all."

"I-I'd be very troubled if you made a judgment based on that event. People who weren't born in the monastery don't understand most of the problems left in the monastery. There's no helping it that we have to spend some time."

Rian frowned and rebutted the rude accusations of the young envoy. Come to think of it, it was more like an empty excuse than a rebuttal. He thought that it was tragic that a person of this level had been able to captain the reformists thanks to his high standing among them. Or perhaps the so-called reformists were just of the same level. Though he hoped that it was the former.

"In any case, I'll have to report the circumstances of the meeting during the day to the Chief. Our contact in the future might go to Priest Jougen instead of you depending on the circumstances."

"Wha!? That kind of ridiculous idea is impossible. You can see at a glance, right? That person won't agree to something like opening the monastery no matter what!"

"Even so, there's no other way as long as he's the person who actually controls this monastery. I don't know how time feels to the people at Seishuku Temple, but the Onmyou Agency no longer has the time to tolerate this kind of pace."

Rian bit his lip at Yamashiro's acrid tone. Though he stared fiercely at the Mystical Investigator, Rian seemed to understand that his words weren't just for show.

"But..... In that case, what do you propose I do?"

"It's very simple. Before we leave the mountain, please let me see some 'results'. Even the Onmyou Agency obviously hopes to negotiate with someone who can make good on what they say. Naturally, it would be the best if Priest Rian were able to show some 'results'."

"....."

Rian lowered his head and sank into silence.

What an indecisive man. But Yamashiro didn't take any further actions to urge Rian. Rather, he smiled leisurely while waiting and sipping brandy.

He had actually considered forgetting Rian and contacting Jougen. But judging from the current situation, that was even more difficult, and more importantly, it was clear at a glance that the negotiations would stall. It would be best if Rian were able to move to seize the real authority of Seishuku Temple. Even if he couldn't do that much, as long as he were able to throw the internals of Seishuku Temple into chaos, the Onmyou Agency would be able to take advantage of the opening and absorb it. The work of Mystical Investigators also included that kind of shady business.

Rian continued thinking silently for a long time.

Finally,

".....There's still a problem."

"What is it?"

"Our comrades..... are basically all young people. Though some are recognized as ajari, it's very unfortunate that at this time, our fighting power is comparatively....."

".....You can't oppose Priest Jougen and the others?"

Yamashiro confirmed quietly and Rian nodded resignedly. How pretentious, to think that their side didn't even know that much.

There were many high-level practitioners in Seishuku Temple. Moreover, most of them were magical criminals who had been tainted by illegal activities. Because of that, they were highly guarded against the Onmyou Agency and they basically supported Priest Jougen as conservatives. That had been the most important

reason the Onmyou Agency had chosen Rian rather than Jougen as their middleman - or perhaps, they had no choice but to choose him.

"If, hypothetically, a head-on confrontation occurred, our chance of victory would be slim..... No, though I think it depends on the methods, even so we would be making a dangerous gamble....." How naive. Yamashiro smiled. What did he mean, their chance of victory would be slim. If the two sides truly separated to fight a magical battle, Rian and the others had no chance of victory at all.

But,

".....Priest. That's why we've been dispatched."

Yamashiro spoke gently. Rian abruptly looked up at the young Mystical Investigators.

"Don't look at me like that, we're just doing our jobs as National First-Class Onmyouji. However, why do you think we were specifically taken from our original posts and chosen to come to Seishuku Temple as envoys?"

"B-But.....!? Then, the other two as well?"

"Ah, sorry. Of course, they don't know. But if something happens, they can't possibly refuse. More importantly - how should I put it, this is a den of magical criminals. With that reason, we can come up with any number of excuses."

Rian's eyes widened at this casually smiling Yamashiro and he gulped. He was silent like that for a while, but in the end he shook his head in a trembling voice.

"Y-You don't know how fearsome Jougen is. Though I don't mean to belittle the Twelve Divine Generals, that man is a monster. I can understand his power because I'm also an ajari."

Yamashiro snorted softly upon hearing Rian's ominous words.

But come to think of it, his words were true. He didn't need to recall Miyoshi's fighting power analysis. He could understand just from 'seeing' Rian that his talent as a practitioner was first-rate, though his actual battle experience was unclear.

Even this Rian was so terrified. That told him that Jougen was on a different level from him.

However, in the end, that was just the strength of a single person.

"In that case, let me ask you something, Priest Rian. Priest Jougen and the others, or in other words the forces of the conservatives, are they 'sincerely' resolved to oppose the Onmyou Agency?"

Rian's eyes opened wide.

"N-No. That kind of thing....."

"No, right? That's right, they couldn't possibly have such determination. At least most people would hesitate. It's fine to be unfamiliar, but someone familiar with society can truly recognize the power of the Onmyou Agency, right? Then would someone who recognizes the power of the Onmyou Agency be able to cross blades with a Divine General, the representative of the Onmyou Agency? Don't you think that they would waver if we made the offer of forgiving their past crimes as long as they gave up on resisting?"

"....."

"Of course, there are some stubborn, self-serving, ignorant seniors among them. Maybe Priest Jougen is like that, for example. But the conservatives should have minds of their own. What do you think they believe about the current simmering Seishuku Temple?"

Rian fell silent again at Yamashiro's sweet words. But this silence felt different from before. His eyes were saturated in an abnormal madness and his lips were tight.

Yamashiro smiled in satisfaction, nodding lightly.

"Priest. Though this is off the record, I obtained sufficient 'decision-making power' from Chief Kurahashi. Please rely on me if you're troubled by anything."

Part 3

It was four in the morning. The landscape was still dark, still shrouded by night. The 'disciples' softly rose, too busy to speak to each other as they scattered to various places under the firelight illumination of the stone lanterns. Some were going to prepare breakfast, some were going to prepare practice for the ajari, and some were responsible for other chores. They all had their own duties.

Of course, Hokuto's duty hadn't been assigned yet. So, today she was also helping with Akino's share. That share of the duty required the two of them to sweep every corner of the area clean with bamboo brooms in hand. Though it could be easily completed by using shikigami, the 'monastery chores' were also training after all. The ajari had instructed that they were to do them on their own.

The mountain mornings became particularly cold with the coming of winter. The two of them put on thick clothing and arrived at the designated area, then started silently sweeping leaves.

Though it wasn't required to be that way, people usually didn't talk much in the morning. It was also because their sleepiness hadn't fully cleared, but it was more like they felt as if it would be better not to disturb the pre-dawn mountain atmosphere with even an extraneous whispering voice. Perhaps they had noticed the presence of humans, as the sound of insects from nearby was only faintly audible. All that was left were the regular scratching sounds produced by the two of them sweeping their bamboo brooms. Soon after, the faint dawn blended with the morning mist, covering the area. The lit stone lanterns crackled, their light swaying strangely in the darkness.

The cry of a bird sounded in the mountain.

Morning would arrive after a while.

Suddenly, the sound of the bamboo brooms stopped. Though it was delayed by a bit, the other one also stopped. Akino held her broom motionlessly, her head lowered. Hokuto also stopped her hands and turned to look upon noticing.

".....Akino?"

Hokuto spoke up to ask. Even though Akino didn't reply, her body was still motionless.

The two of them almost hadn't spoken yesterday night after the ominous words that the tengu shikigami had left behind. Though Hokuto opened her mouth as if to say something, she ended up swallowing her words back into her stomach.

"Akino. I'll go sweep over there."

Akino instinctively cast her gaze towards there, feeling the gloominess in the words. The face of the Hokuto who met her eye was filled with loneliness - Akino finally mustered the courage. Akino gripped her broom, walking towards the Hokuto who was cautiously keeping her distance from her.

"Akino?" A surprised expression surfaced on Hokuto as she noticed this.

She approached Hokuto and was able to smell her sweet aroma.

But Akino wasn't interested in that.

"U-Um, H-Hokuto."

"Yes."

"Y-You know about yesterday? Um, what Tengu-san said, well, y-you don't need to worry too much about it, so....."

"Eh?"

Hokuto couldn't conceal her confusion towards Akino who was racking her brains. But Akino was unconcerned, going "Nnn" while nodding vigorously as if she intended it for herself.

"I-I only learned that Tengu-san could talk yesterday. I have no clue why he would say something like that. So don't be concerned. E-Even I'm not interested."

Her final words were clearly a lie.

But it wasn't a serious lie.

Akino gazed at Hokuto through her glasses. When she compared them like this, Hokuto was half a head taller than Akino. Hokuto hesitated slightly while looking at the little Akino, but.....

Her expression suddenly relaxed.

She took on a mischievous expression, her eyes smiling.

"But..... What would you do if I were really a dead person? Would that be alright?"

"Of - Of course, what's the problem!? There are a lot of weird people here. I-I'm also a rabbit living spirit. That's not anything to be concerned about!"

Akino asserted that completely seriously, completely solemnly.

At the same time, lag appeared on the girl's hair and long rabbit ears poked out. But Akino no longer had any intentions of hiding them. She looked into Hokuto's eyes with moist eyes and a near-crying appearance.

Hokuto quietly closed her eyes.

".....Thank you. Akino..... You're truly gentle."

She calmly said.

Then, she kept saying "I'm sorry".

"I - I'm actually hiding a lot of things from you. If I were forced to say them, I would definitely get you into trouble. But..... The fact that I'm being dishonest compared to you won't change."

"Hokuto."

Akino's eyes widened as she gazed motionlessly at Hokuto.

"I-It's fine. Everyone's like that here."

Everyone had their own reasons for coming to the monastery. Akino knew nothing about anything outside the monastery, and it was very difficult for her to imagine. More importantly, asking about the pasts of others was tabooed in the monastery. This could only become the final destination for people with no one else to go because it was a place far removed from worldliness. In that sense, it was as expected for a so-called 'monastery'.

It would be a lie if she said she didn't want to know. But there were things that she wanted to protect even if she lied.

But Hokuto's frankness didn't stop there.

"Akino. There's something I hope you can understand. I came here with a goal."

"A-A goal."

"Yes. Also..... I'll leave this place when things finish."

".....Eh?"

Those were unexpected words. Even the shock she had received at hearing that Hokuto was a spirit definitely hadn't been as large as what she received from hearing that sentence.

"B-B-But, leaving the monastery isn't that easy..... T-The only ones who can leave are basically priests who became ajari, you know? You have to go through many years of training to be recognized if you want to become a priest....."

Akino instantly explained that, but at the same time, she knew that wasn't the truth.

Many people who entered the monastery entered because they had nowhere to go in the outside world. Hence, there were very few people who wanted to leave. There were people who sneaked out because they got tired of life at the monastery, but these people ended up returning to the mountain and returning to their previous life after receiving punishment.

But the monastery wouldn't especially pursue a fugitive who sneaked out. Even more so if the fugitive was a 'disciple' and not an ajari. To homeless practitioners, the monastery was their last stronghold and not their prison. In principle, non-ajari people were forbidden from going outside, but that was just to keep up discipline. They wouldn't purposefully call back people who could live on outside.

Hence, if Hokuto wanted to sneak out of the monastery, perhaps she would succeed. Even if it were known beforehand that she wanted to escape, nothing could be done at all.

Hokuto said that she was being dishonest. Then maybe she stubbornly wanted to tell Akino that she was going to 'leave this place' to at least compensate her a bit.

"Even though I decided that by myself, I'm really sorry."

Hokuto apologized again. This time, Akino could no longer make a reply at all.

Her rabbit ears silently drooped. Hokuto stayed agonizingly silent as she watched from the side.

"H.....How long will it be until it's over?"

".....I don't know. But since my father read the stars a week ago, perhaps it will happen very soon..... In a few days, I guess."

"How?"

Akino didn't understand what 'reading the stars' meant. But that kind of thing didn't matter now that she had heard something like 'a few days'.

How lonesome. How depressing.

But, at the same time,

.....I guess that's right.

She thought.

Hadn't she always felt that she was a rare type that couldn't be found in the monastery? She should have known long ago that she wasn't someone who would be content with the monastery. A pretty, gentle person like her wasn't suited to this kind of remote world. More importantly, it's even more impossible for her to stay next to someone like me.

Hokuto had only come to the Seishuku Temple that didn't suit her because she had her own goals. Then I just happened to lead her around. That's it. Why am I so depressed at this simple matter? Also, what exactly was I looking forward to? My expectations were so foolish.

"....."

This won't do. Since Hokuto is very gentle, she might feel responsible if she sees my sorrowful attitude. There's finally someone who trusts me and told me a few secrets. This won't do.

"Is....."

"Eh?"

"Is there anything I can help with? Anything?"

Hokuto's eyes widened.

She smiled a bit bitterly and shook her head lightly.

"I really can't win against you, Akino."

She spoke quietly, her voice filled with a gratitude that couldn't be hidden. Akino became confused with an "Eh? Eh?" when she heard those unexpected words.

Hokuto changed the way she held the broom in front of her chest and spoke quietly but happily.

"Then, Akino. Can I ask you for a very embarrassing thing right now?"

"W-What is it?"

"Please be friends with me."

Her rabbit ears stood up.

Her cheeks reddened right there. Before her mind had reacted with what to say, her mouth had already made strange stuttering sounds by itself. It was nothing to brag about, but she had never had a 'friend' since she had been born. If you had to say, Sen probably counted, but this was the first person of a similar age. 'Friends' were one of the many things she had missed out on as a useless person who had grown up in the monastery and who knew nothing except for the monastery.

Even so.....

"No good?"

"T-T-T-That's not - what - I mean--!"

Her tongue almost got tied up in her rushed state of nervousness and excitement. Akino barely managed to reply. The ears on her head also jumped left and right. Hokuto smiled while happily saying "Thank you."

...What should I do?

I have a friend. I made a friend. But what should I do with a friend? She started becoming confused and agitated after she started getting happy. Akino desperately dug through her lacking knowledge. Anyway, she should start with

bread. She ought to go buy some yakisoba bread. But she didn't have any money on her, and she didn't even know where to buy yakisoba bread.

With a curious face, Hokuto looked on at the flustered Akino from the side.

"Right. Hey, Akino. As thanks for becoming my friend, I'll let you see something strange."

"Eh?"

Hokuto laughed brightly, suddenly extending her right hand to the side. "Keep it a secret," she said to Akino. Then, she spoke as if to the area above her palm.

"......It's alright. Come out."

She wasn't speaking to Akino - the instant she thought that, a faint light flashed above Hokuto's palm. A golden light about as large as a temari[34]. That light slowly extended into a ribbon. Akino gulped as she watched the light. A 'dragon' about one meter long came from that golden light - rather, that light condensed together to form it.

No, Akino wasn't sure whether it was truly a dragon or whether it was something else. Because its size was too small no matter what. But just like the dragons Akino knew of, it had two horns and a mane, along with four short clawed limbs. It was covered in bright golden scales that flashed like jewels in the mist as it twisted elegantly.

"....."

Akino couldn't say anything, her attention stolen by the dragon that had appeared before her. At the same time, the dragon also gave a similar gaze at the girl with rabbit ears on her head that was looking at it. Its expression seemed to be saying 'What's this? This person's really strange'. The dragon floated lightly in the air like that.

...How amazing.

What a beautiful creature. It was like a living piece of art. A shikigami, probably. But it probably wasn't the manmade kind of shikigami that could be seen everywhere. Though the aura she felt from the being before her definitely wasn't very strong, she could feel a noble air.

Then, Akino suddenly turned to look at Hokuto.

"Hokuto, this, is it Hokuto's?"

Hokuto had said that she had been a water dragon living spirit. And water dragons were a kind of dragon[35]. They looked very similar to dragons on the outside.

"It is, right? Because look how small it is. This is a 'water dragon', right?"

"...Ah, um....."

Hokuto didn't reply to her immediately. But as Akino said that with such naive confidence and innocence, the dragon's movements seemed to suddenly turn different from before.

It glided through the air in front of Akino. Akino was reflexively taken aback, but she still continued staring enthusiastically with a childlike curiosity at the dragon. Her ears twitched as if to express Akino's excitement.

The dragon stared at those ears for a while.

It bit down all of a sudden.

The rabbit ears buzzed with lag, ignoring Akino and Hokuto who were momentarily petrified. One second later, Akino wailed with an "aah".

"You!? Hey, Hokuto! What are you doing!?"

"M-My, e-e, e-ear.....!?"

"Let go! Let go right now!"

Akino wailed as if begging for her ears to be spared, running around back and forth. The dragon biting her ear flew around like a banner.

Akino's agility was shocking.

How fast.

It was just unconscious, disorderly movement, but they were frighteningly fast. It was already at the level where she could see afterimages, no joke. Though Hokuto desperately pursued, she immediately gave up. Or rather, it was already tiring to keep up with her eyes. She moved like a fleeing rabbit.

"Hokuto!"[36]

The dragon finally released its jaw upon hearing that angry bellow. At the same time, Akino's feet tangled together and she fell down with a thump. Hokuto hastily ran towards Akino.

"Akino! Are you alright?"

"Ueeh..... My ear....."

"That... idiot Hokuto! There's a limit to how unreasonable you can be!"

Though Hokuto's eyebrows furrowed and she glared at the dragon, the dragon didn't look ashamed. It took up an arrogant attitude unsuited to its size and even waved its tail as if to say that it was obvious payback.

"Sorry. That idiot still does whatever it wants, even after all these years..... It thinks of itself as a dragon, so it gets indiscriminately angry when people treat it as a water dragon."

Hokuto helped the sprawled Akino up. In contrast, the dragon to the side showed its teeth again. It seemed to be dissatisfied with the explanation of it. Hokuto narrowed her eyes and glared back in irritation.

"So annoying. Hokuto was like a water dragon just now, right? First off, how can you call yourself a dragon when you bite a kid who's done nothing at all? If you don't like water dragon, we'll just call you 'lizard'."

Though the dragon twisted back and forth, extremely upset, it didn't take any further actions of opposition. It had probably considered that it would really be a pain if it were called 'lizard'.

"....'Hokuto'?"

"Ah, Akino. Are you alright? I'm really so--"

"Did you call it 'Hokuto' just now?"

Akino first looked at the dragon and then looked up at Hokuto, still sitting on the ground. Her glasses were slipping because she had run back and forth and then fallen over. But the lag of the ears on her head had already stopped and they had returned to normal.

Hokuto was finally relieved.

"Yes. Its name is Hokuto."

"The same name?"

".....Rather than having the same name, it's more like we're 'the same'. Because right now, half of me can only exist due to Hokuto."

"Wh-What happened? .....Ah, sorry. I'm not very knowledgeable about magic things, so I don't understand what you said, Hokuto....."

Akino spoke with a confused face. Hokuto smiled while replying, "It's alright."

"Just like you said before, Akino, it's possessing me..... No, I'm 'letting' it possess me. Hence it wasn't a lie when I said I was a living spirit right now."

"Can you stand?" Hokuto asked gently. Then, she pulled her hand and stood up with Akino. Akino adjusted her crooked glasses while looking between Hokuto and the dragon. She alternated between the human and the dragon.

The girl Hokuto and the dragon Hokuto.

".....What a surprise."

"Yeah. R-Really, I'm sorry."

"Ah, I wasn't talking about that..... H-Hokuto, is it that you can let the water dragon - the dragon - possess you from the outside?"

Right as the phrase 'water dragon' left her mouth, she hastily changed her wording. Hokuto said "Yeah" while nodding.

"My circumstances are pretty unique. Though I say that, I can only let a bit of it out. The thing floating over there isn't the main body, it's a very small part of it."

Even so, it was still shocking. Akino had never heard of such a thing being possible. Akino's gaze was drawn to the dragon again. But her psychological trauma from being bitten hadn't vanished. When she met the turning dragon's gaze, the ears on her head instantly leaped in the opposite direction. It was such a small dragon, but it looked majestic.

"But I was also surprised just now! Akino, you're extremely fast. You weren't using magic movement methods, right? Could it be because of the rabbit living spirit?"

"Uu, yeah. Though I'm not very sure myself, Priest Tadanori and Sen-jiichan think that's probably why."

Akino's only talent was running fast, especially when she was escaping. In the first place, she could only wield her greatest speed when she was in a panicked state like before. In that case, it was possible that she would run into trees or fall down from a cliff, so normally she ran with much more control.

But rather than that,

"Ahh, oh no....."

She looked at the ground. The leaves they had managed to gather had been kicked all over because of her mindless running back and forth. They would have to start all over again. Hokuto noticed Akino's gaze and expression and smiled wryly while patting her shoulder.

"We can still make it if we're fast. I'll have Hokuto help too."

"Eh? How will it help?"

"Well, good point. Anyway, I'll have it start off by gathering leaves up one by one with its mouth."

The dragon opposed as if saying "Don't joke around like that". But Hokuto said "This is punishment" with a deliberate expression of feigned ignorance. It looked like though she said they were 'the same', Hokuto was in a more powerful position than this dragon. Akino giggled, but she immediately turned her face away in a panic when she saw the dragon staring at her.

Suddenly, right then.

Akino's ears reacted keenly. The dragon also abruptly became alert.

".....It was you? The yin aura of the area has been dropping since the morning."

Though that voice was neither loud nor fierce, it still rumbled as it passed over the ground.

Hokuto and Akino's heads shot over.

A monk stood in the mist.

A kasaya was draped over his black monk's clothing. He was an old ajari. But though he was old, he didn't feel senile at all. It was unclear how large his body was, but it gave off a stifling pressure. A burning gaze came from the depths of his slightly narrowed eyes.

"P-Priest Jougen!"

Akino even forgot to hide her two ears, bowing deeply in a panic.

Hokuto saw her reactions from the side and bowed like Akino with a nervous expression. The dragon continued floating in the air while leisurely returning to Hokuto's side. The dragon's gaze remained on Jougen.

At the same time, Jougen sized up the three of them while casually walking towards them.

His fluid movements didn't make any noise. The hem of his monk's clothing rustled as it swayed, and the mist around them dispersed as if shaken by the ajari's might.

Then, Jougen stopped in front of the two of them.

Akino's knees shook in her nervousness. Hokuto continued bowing her head from next to her while watching Jougen with a careful look. Her rabbit ears trembled slightly and Akino gulped. Hokuto was currently like an ajari before practice, like a practitioner about to face actual battle training.

Jougen opened his mouth and spoke slowly.

"I heard from Tadanori. You are the newcomer Kengyou brought?"

"...Yes."

"Your name?"

"Hokuto."

"Last name?"

"I heard that I would no longer need it after entering the monastery."

"Indeed. Nothing is asked of other peoples' past here. But--"

Jougen stopped talking for a while. Though Akino could 'see' Hokuto's aura with her head lowered, she couldn't glimpse her expression. The only thing she understood was that her heart was beating agitatedly and nonstop.

"Raise your head."

Akino straightened as if she had been pulled up with rope, but Hokuto moved calmly and fluidly. The two of them raised their heads.

Jougen gazed at Hokuto with narrowed eyes. His burning gaze seemed to be all the more powerful when he was unarmed. Hokuto hadn't even twitched facing Tadanori, but right now her expression became stiff when she was in front of Jougen. But she didn't draw back. She visibly gritted her teeth and resisted Jougen's magnetic-seeming feeling of might.

Jougen was the most awe-inspiring ajari in the whole monastery. Someone like Akino would shake uncontrollably just by standing in front of him. She couldn't be like Hokuto no matter what.

But that wasn't to say that she could do nothing at all.

...W-Why is Hokuto being this confrontational.....!?

Hokuto stared straight at Jougen. Her stance was as if she was about to fight with Jougen. Could it be because the dragon had been seen? Come to think of it, Hokuto had said 'keep it a secret'. Maybe she was angry because it had been seen.

In any case, this couldn't go on. Akino thought this while resolving herself to jump off from the stage of Kiyomizu[37]. She closed her eyes and straightened her spine.

"P, P-P-P-Priest Jougen!"

She raised her voice as much as she could.

"I-I, I was told to take care of Hokuto by Priest Tadanori. T-The water dragon floating there..... Hokuto is a water dragon living spirit. And, um, i-if she's done anything wrong, I'll lecture her sternly later on! A-And Hokuto? This is Priest Jougen, the greatest priest of Seishuku Temple! S-So, don't act like that..... B-Be polite, um....."

Though Akino single-mindedly thought of how to improve the situation, she ended up becoming incoherent because of the pressure from the two sides. She ended up failing beautifully, as if pouring oil on a fire. A chill ran through her reddened face. Even Hokuto was no longer paying any attention to Akino. She didn't reply, staying motionless.

However,

"I am not the one in charge of this mountain."

It was Jougen who replied. "Eh?" Akino couldn't help but speak quietly. Then, she closed her mouth in a panic and lowered her head.

Jougen glanced at the small dragon.

".....Water dragon? Living spirit?"

"....."

"Then what's this 'Soul-forging incense'?"

"....."

Hokuto didn't reply. But her body visibly became even stiffer the moment she heard those last words.

Akino didn't interrupt after this. What was 'Soul-forging incense'? Could it refer to that scent of incense from Hokuto's body? What did he mean by talking about it? Akino surreptitiously looked upwards in her fear, peeking at Jougen's appearance.

Suddenly,

...Hmm?

She saw Jougen's lips showing a smile. The ajari's feeling of pressure she had sensed until now receded - though it didn't just disappear.

".....Ah, well. It was my desire for anyone capable to be able to enter this monastery. Do your best."

He said that in a low, smooth voice. Jougen turned around.

He departed from the two of them on his own through the faintly-lingering mist. The strength inadvertently drained out of Hokuto's body and she slumped down.

But,

"Priest Jougen! Y-You won't believe it!"

Several monks came running from the monastery courtyard along with sudden cries. Tadanori's figure was visible among them. "...Hokuto!" Hokuto rapidly commanded and the dragon instantly vanished. Akino also frantically dematerialized the ears flinching in surprise on her head, making them vanish.

At the same time, Jougen, who had just left, stopped, staring at the monks and recovering his normal, tough face.

".....What is it?"

"U-Um!"

"Just now, there were shikigami from the mountain gate--"

"Th-They had this message--"

The monks were quite panicked. Tadanori came forward, passing over a heavily-folded piece of paper. Jougen took the message, spreading it open with a wave of his hand and moving his gaze over the message.

After he read it, a smile even more powerful than the one before emerged on his thin lips.

But it was just for a moment. Akino and Hokuto observed Jougen's smile, but could only stand in the distance blankly watching the situation unfold.

".....Understood. All of you, return."

"Jougen-sama!"

"Th-This is a huge matter for the mountain!"

"After the Divine Generals yesterday....."

Tadanori and the other priests spoke one after another - though strangely cautious of the surroundings - and peppered Jougen with questions.

However, Jougen was unmoved. He just stared at the monks as if saying 'fools'.

"You're no better than Rian like this. How unsightly. Why don't you be a bit more patient?"

"But, Priest! If this goes on--"

"If the visitor is indeed him--"

"Ahem!" - Jougen roared.

The monks went silent as if they had been electrified. They all froze in place. Though Akino and Hokuto were relatively far, they practically stopped breathing.

".....Return to training, all of you."

After loftily announcing this to the frozen monks, Jougen finally left. Though the left-behind monks stayed petrified for a while, they finally regained their freedom of movement and stared talking with lowered voices.

...W-What exactly was going on this time?

Akino had never seen the monks seem wary about their surroundings like this. She had only lived day after day in the monastery, though.

Akino didn't know what to do about the 'change' that had appeared before her for the first time or about that 'omen'.

Suddenly,

"......Could it be....."

Hokuto murmured.

Hokuto desperately strained her ears to hear the monks' conversations. She watched them as if trying to wolf down the state of affairs from there.

The Hokuto at that time seemed like she had known long ago what was going to happen next.

Akino felt an intense unrest in her chest as she looked at the side of Hokuto's face.

Not long afterwards, the name of the visitor to the mountain emerged from the mouths of the people at the monastery.

Chapter 3 - Sacred Ground of Conspiracy

Part 1

The Onmyou Agency, which supervised the Onmyouji of the entire nation based on Onmyou law. Actually, it could be called the government body commanding the magic community. Its headquarters was in Tokyo's Akihabara. The headquarters of the Exorcist Bureau, which headed the purification of spiritual disasters, was in the nearby Kanda.

Though the headquarters had been attacked by Onmyouji a year ago, it had been long since repaired by now and the traces of damage from back then had long

since vanished. Right now, it still ushered in a man with an immovable heart, who still fulfilled his duty as the central figure in the magic world.

He was the Onmyou Agency Chief, Kurahashi Genji.

It was already past 10 o'clock in the morning. Kurahashi, who was immersed in work day after day, didn't show any signs of fatigue on his face as he moved about his business.

He kept up a steely appearance and an unshakeable will, walking to the executive office. His figure seemed like that of a king returning to his castle.

But Kurahashi only kept up that steely, stern attitude until he entered the executive office.

"Ah, good morning~" The man lying lazily on the sofa used for receiving guests casually greeted Kurahashi.

Kurahashi's gaze moved to the man on the sofa and his eyebrows raised slightly.

"Don't come in whenever you want. How many times do I have to tell you for you to understand?"

"Didn't I also say so many times not to be so unfamiliar?"

"What happened to your duty?"

"I just got some permission to come rest a bit."

"Shikigami don't need anything like rest."

"That's so cruel. Even though I'm a shikigami, I also have human rights... Ah... I guess I don't..."

Though he also admitted his mistake, he didn't intend to get up from the sofa at all.

Kurahashi snorted quietly to end the meaningless conversation, then walked over to the desk in his room.

The two of them contrasted sharply with each other.

Kurahashi was a man from the fiftieth generation of his family. He had a sturdy frame and gave off a forbidding air when he was silent. He possessed a mature dominating air and a wise intellect, and the impression he gave others was absolutely not the kind that would do things half-heartedly. Rather, he had an overwhelming feeling of might.

But that might wasn't just natural talent. Kurahashi was the head of a famous Onmyouji family as well as being the Exorcists Bureau chief and the Mystical Investigator Chief. He was someone whose power and achievements were at the apex of the magic community - out of all Onmyouji.

On the other hand, the young man lying on the sofa looked only sixteen or seventeen from his appearance. A trendy young man. But strangely, he wore a round crystal lens over his right eye. That strange fashion style had an aristocratic air, as if he gave off an aura of unconcern, decadence, and profligacy from all over his body.

His name was Yashamaru. He was a shikigami now, but his name in his previous life had been Dairenji Shidou. He had been a National First-Class Onmyouji nicknamed the 'Professor', and had once been the director of the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division.

He was also the mastermind behind the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack three years ago, and had been a leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, a now-wiped out secret society of Yakou fanatics.

It was very strange that they were together, as they clearly ought to be enemies.

But right now the two of them were 'comrades'. The two of them had secretly been 'fighting together' since Dairenji Shidou had been resurrected as Yashamaru not long ago. Well, it wasn't just the 'two of them'. The Kurahashi and Souma families that they served had been allies since the ancient Warring States Period.

Yashamaru laid down leisurely, his head covered by the newspaper he was currently reading.

"You're as busy as always."

"You're quite free."

"Didn't I say I was resting? Don't always say such irritating things."

"Unfortunately, manpower is insufficient right now, as after all, there are three National First-Class Onmyouji who are not in Tokyo. Daily affairs are troubled, and I have to prepare for my work. I don't have the time to chat with you."

Kurahashi placed the files he was organizing in his hands on the desk while speaking.

"Yeah~"

Yashamaru lay down lazily, moving his gaze from the newspaper as he replied.

"Miyoshi and the others only left from Tokyo yesterday. There was Yuge too, and who else?"

"Yamashiro."

"Oh, that guy. Yeah, he's serving as the contact with the dark temple."

Yashamaru finally stood himself up, neatly placing the newspaper on the table.

As he snickered, the eye beneath his monocle flashed with cunning.

"How is he? Is your disciple useful?"

"That depends on how I use him."

"Ah, so in other words, it depends on what you decide. Incidentally, it seems like his title isn't hidden like 'Shadow's."

"Not every Mystical Investigator's name is hidden."

"Does it depend on how those people are used?"

"That's right."

It was Kurahashi who was commanding the Mystical Investigators right now, so it wouldn't be too wrong to say that this was his policy.

"Hmmm." Yashamaru replied vaguely with an extremely pleased appearance.

"Well, it's enough if he's usable. You know about his ability as well as anyone. But the Mystical Investigators really have heaps of work right now."

"It's not just the Mystical Investigators, we're severely lacking talent in the Agency."

"'Talent' and not 'members', huh. What a pain."

Yashamaru chuckled with an unconcerned demeanor.

Last winter, the jurisdiction that Onmyou law set down had finally been widened after several spiritual disasters. The Onmyou Agency's influence had been steadily growing every day since then, whether on the legal or illegal side of things.

At first, when Onmyou law was enacted for the first time, people had extremely negative impressions of the world's Onmyouji. In the first place, magic was an unknown technique in the eyes of people who had nothing to do with magic. Moreover, the former organization that led the Onmyouji, the Onmyou Agency's predecessor - the Onmyou Bureau - had been a military organization revived by the old Japanese military. It was an organization meant to deal with the intimidating, fearsome spiritual disasters that happened frequently. The background set by Onmyou law was meant to legally bind the Onmyouji in place. At the same time, it was also the truth that it was that way in order to obtain 'approval' from the public. To take it to the extreme, Onmyou law was a 'purification' ritual against the Onmyouji that could use magic capable of affecting a war.

And now, that 'purification' that had lasted half a century was finally over, and magic and Onmyouji were able to spread their wings and soar high in society again. Of course, they hadn't taken any openly power-hungry actions in order to avoid agitating the world - or more accurately, the other ministries and agencies. But the improvements in Onmyou law were focused on expanding the boundaries related to magic and Onmyouji. However, the Onmyou Agency's size hadn't expanded in proportion to its rapidly expanding jurisdiction. The Onmyou Agency had many ordinary workers, but they all had various duties. Only professional Onmyouji could assist with the 'current' situations. Resources of talent like professional Onmyouji couldn't be supplemented immediately. There were already very few people with the talents to be practitioners, and there were even fewer with the talents to be professional Onmyouji. Moreover, one had to accumulate first-hand experience in order to become independent. The expansion of an organization of practitioners required a long amount of time and lots of manpower.

"But....." Yashamaru spoke while looking at Kurahashi next to the desk.

"Was it really good to redeploy three of the Twelve Divine Generals in this kind of situation where manpower is insufficient? Never mind the contact Yamashiro for now, but Yuge is an exorcist who's always been dependable during long periods of insufficient manpower and one of the Independent Exorcists central to the Exorcist Bureau. I should have to say even less about a Special Senser like Miyoshi, it's incredibly rare that he's excused from work. Of course, the same is true of letting them leave Tokyo. We can't even give them any other work."

What Yashamaru pointed out wasn't exaggerated. The Twelve Divine Generals were the National First-Class Onmyouji, human resources that couldn't be acquired on a large scale as well as valuable fighting power that could only be acquired in small quantities. On the other hand, if they were used incorrectly, the Onmyou Agency would be inoperable.

There were currently only three Spirit Sensers among the Twelve Divine Generals, and their particular techniques were extremely important to spiritual disaster purification. Their talents were particularly scarce among the National First-Class Onmyouji when manpower was inadequate. Originally, they wouldn't

have been selected to carry out missions in other places unless there was no other choice.

But.....

"You could say that Miyoshi himself wished to be mobilized for this mission. Just call this matter a drill."

Someone from the Exorcist Bureau would inevitably have doubts if he heard that, so Kurahashi spoke very calmly.

"I trust you've heard of that 'sensory net'?"

Unexpectedly, Yashamaru became serious and asked with a cold tone. The sensory net that Yashamaru spoke of was an abbreviation for the 'spiritual disaster early detection sensory net' that the Onmyou Agency had placed within the city.

The way the Exorcist Bureau had discovered spiritual disasters before was by actually using human observation. Spirit Sensors had been placed in various locations in the city twenty-four hours a day, constantly watching the level of aura disruption. If an abnormality occurred , operatives would immediately be appointed to mobilize and check the situation on the scene and then report to the Exorcist Bureau Intelligence Division. Right now, the 'sensory net' replaced those methods.

They had only used large-scale manpower tactics because spiritual disasters couldn't be seen or traced except by people who had spirit-seeing ability. But the 'spiritual disaster early detection sensory net' plan that was currently being put into practice made it so that shikigami could detect spiritual disasters in place of and as well as Spirit Sensers. They used relatively safer, materialized mechanical manmade shikigami instead of summoned forms. These mechanical shikigami had magic to sense the flow of aura added to them and were positioned along the aura flow within Tokyo to regularly report information about the aura.

Of course, the shikigami couldn't work unless they were supplied with a certain amount of magical energy, so it was necessary to supply them with magical

energy every so often. But spiritual disasters happened for many kinds of reasons, and the mechanical shikigami were restricted from going to check out unknown situations by preset conditions on their magic. But even so, the use of this sensory net greatly reduced the burden on the Spirit Sensers, and its effectiveness was quite evident. In any case, if the sensory net truly worked, they would be able to detect spiritual disasters ahead of time and get ahold of information on spiritual disasters. With that, they expected an increase in speed with which they dealt with and purified spiritual disasters.

"The mechanical shikigami deployed now are still in the test stage, right? Regardless, their numbers are still insufficient."

"Even so, we've already put a portion of them into testing. If they're truly effective, then the twins will be able to make up for the spiritual disaster sensing inside the city."

"Don't you think the two don't have enough experience?"

"Then it'll be fine if they just accumulate experience. Wouldn't it be worse if we didn't train such valuable talent?"

Among the three Special Sensers, the two other than Miyoshi were a pair of twin Onmyouji. Their individual abilities were incomparable to Miyoshi's, but if the two of them worked together, they were more than twice as capable as Miyoshi. That was why Miyoshi's redeployment would become possible if the sensory net was completed. ...That was what Kurahashi thought.

Yashamaru frowned.

"We should try to keep 'that' as secret as possible."

"It'll be fine if you just change the way you think. Those kinds of things are hard to spot in the first place."

"They're on the mountain without knowing the truth? Could it be that you made the decision that you should proceed secretly with a coin toss?"

Yashamaru smirked and mocked him, but just that much wouldn't make his old friend change his mind. The reticent man wasn't willing to waste his breath even if a shikigami drove him on. Yashamaru said "My, my", then laid his body back on the sofa in a slovenly manner.

"Well, I also know that the priority right now is the strengthening of the Mystical Investigators. The most worrying things right now are men, not spiritual disasters."

"It seems like there are humans who can also be 'spiritual disasters', you know."

"Wow, what a revelation." Yashamaru leaned back and spoke half-jokingly.

Kurahashi just indifferently continued the topic from before in response.

"In the first place, Miyoshi was even more suited to the Mystical Investigators. Especially now, I hope that his spirit-sensing ability could be used for the Mystical Investigators instead of the Exorcist Bureau.

The ability to 'see' aura was the basic ability of a practitioner. Spirit Sensers possessed excellent spirit-sensing ability, and that represented a considerable advantage in situational awareness of other magics.

Moreover, Spirit Sensers were also good at perceiving spiritual disasters.

Finally, there were mobile spiritual disasters that were called 'spirits'. They weren't purely hazardous existences. There were many examples of them becoming powerful 'shikigami' for Onmyouji.

"Actually, the Mystical Investigators have many targets right now. Tsuchimikado Harutora, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's group of three, Shadow and Priest Doman, Amami Daizen. Even if they're spotted, a normal Mystical Investigator would be helpless against any of them. The only thing we can do is have the Mystical Investigators act together. But in the end, it still depends on what Tsuchimikado Harutora and the others do."

After the reform to Onmyou law, the influence of the magic community had changed greatly along with the widening of the Onmyou Agency's jurisdiction. Several powers that opposed the Onmyou Agency had slowly surfaced amidst that. For example, the Seishuku Temple that three Divine General were currently heading to for negotiations would very likely become an opposing force in the future. But the one that the Onmyou Agency wanted the most and pursued with the greatest force among these several dangerous forces was Tsuchimikado Harutora. He was currently becoming slowly known among the public as a terrorist.

This was an outcome that the Onmyou Agency was one-sidedly intentionally controlling. The Onmyou Agency had made his image into the greatest threat and the most dangerous existence to the magic community. But that judgment wasn't caused by Tsuchimikado Harutora's actions.

He was suspected of using forbidden magic during the summer of the last year. Moreover, he had confronted the Onmyou Agency several times after that and had interfered with official business. He, among several magic criminals, had special attention because of his potential threat. His individual importance was similar to the 'D' file in the past. But the biggest reason he was viewed as a danger was because of the circulating rumors that he was the reincarnation of the father of modern magic, Tsuchimikado Yakou. Those rumors were slowly being accepted.

And because of those reasons, it was very probable that he would become the standard-bearer for the forces opposing the Onmyou Agency. If he used Tsuchimikado Yakou's fame as a 'leader', it was possible that he would unite the currently scattered anti-Onmyou Agency forces together one by one.

...At least the Onmyou Agency worried that such a possibility existed.

"Actually, putting aside Yasuzumi-kun and the others along with Shadow for now, only Tsuchimikado Yakou is setting his sights on the Onmyou Agency. Well, I can't say anything about Amami, but he can't possibly be not paying attention to Yakou's reincarnation."

In any case, Tsuchimikado Harutora required the most attention among the dangerous elements that the Onmyou Agency was minding.

They didn't know how they would respond once he moved. That was why Tsuchimikado Yakou was the most dangerous.

"I wish we at least knew a bit about what he was thinking....."

"Can you not imagine anything either?"

"No, no. First off, the current him is both Harutora and Yakou. I don't know whether he's two people or one. I can't even get a grip on his personality, so predicting his actions is impossible."

"When you saw him with the Souma princess at the end before, you indeed reported that 'he gave off an impression of being Yakou."

"To tell the truth, I'm only twenty or thirty percent sure, I can't be certain."

Yashamaru shrugged his shoulders as he spoke.

"Moreover, even if Yakou truly awakened, what would the awakened Yakou want to do to the current magical community? That's another question.

Also, if you think about it carefully, weren't we originally trying to inherit Yakou's will? Why are we opposing him now? Did we get a bad impression from the incident last summer? Hmm, it indeed wasn't that good, but how can we let the awakened Yakou's judgment of good and evil be hampered? Also, didn't we try apologizing for our mistakes last summer?"

The true intent of Tsuchimikado Harutora's actions since last summer were mystifying. It was also one of the reasons the Onmyou Agency confronted him. Perhaps it was the wrong move to call him a terrorist without knowing his goal. But they still didn't know what his true goal was, and in any case, the distribution of power would definitely change.

As expected, Tsuchimikado Harutora was still at the center of things.

"One more time....."

"Hmm?"

"We need to talk with him again....."

Kurahashi spoke calmly and resolutely. Yashamaru didn't disagree with him, as he also felt that this was a need. The Kurahashi and the Souma had been allies and supporters since ancient times. Supporters of whom? Of course, the supporters of Yakou in the past. The king of the magic community wasn't the Kurahashi family or the Souma family. Rather, it had been the Tsuchimikado family for centuries - the king's bloodline descended from Abe no Seimei.

"The problem is..... How can we contact him? We have no way right now other than having the Mystical Investigators search."

Yashamaru deliberately looked at Kurahashi, revealing an evil smile.

"Could you get your mother to help? This is the kind of situation where we need 'divination'. Anyway, she's very free now since she retired from the Onmyou Academy."

"I think it's probably impossible."

"Then what about your daughter? Are there any traces of the other side contacting her?"

"None."

Kurahashi replied immediately without even looking at the shikigami. Then, he picked up the files placed on the table and started reading them with an oft used posture.

"Ah, I see." Yashamaru clicked his tongue.

"Well, the other side can't really touch the Kurahashi family. Yasuzumi-kun and the others are quiet as usual. How annoying~ And I can't find any clues from that living spirit boy either."

"Judging by the circumstances, it's very likely that Shadow and Amami are moving together. Perhaps Amami....."

"Come to think of it, Shadow's the only one moving around undisguised~ We're not going to be able to just sit back and watch that guy anymore soon."

A cruel light instantly emerged from the eye under his monocle.

Kurahashi spoke in order to make him calm down.

"Kogure will act if there's any movement."

"I know that. He should be used to it now, right? To the Mystical Investigator work?"

"He's used to it, but he's not as good as we expected. Kogure's just an excellent watchdog, he's not a hound. Especially when the opponent is an old fox."

"Yeah..... Hey hey, then why were we willing to move such a precious Independent Exorcist's fighting power....."

"It was for Miyoshi."

"Ohh....."

He got it. Yashamaru nodded his head in understanding. He was still like always, a man able to anticipate everything beforehand, make decisions, and take action.

Yashamaru put his hands behind him on the back of the sofa, waving his raised legs back and forth.

"It's not just the industry. The organizational structure of the Onmyou Agency was mostly reworked too."

"Of course. An organization that can't change won't grow."

Kurahashi scanned the topics of his papers while speaking calmly. That was the power of an organization leader, one that couldn't be stopped by a pure practitioner.

"How's your side? Are things still going smoothly with the Souma princess?"

"Yeah, there are no problems for now. The training is going very smoothly."

"Even though you say that, you can't come to the executive office to kill time so often. Think of the princess."

"Don't say such nasty things, Kumomaru's staying with the Princess while I'm lazing - resting, so there won't be any other problems. Also....."

"What?"

"I've had my daughter accompany the princess to take her mind off things recently. It wasn't easy~" Yashamaru smiled slightly as he spoke. He didn't have an evil smile, and that was why he looked all the more chilling to someone informed.

Kurahashi looked quietly at his old friend for a moment. Then, he returned his gaze to the papers in his hands.

"She hasn't had contact with Tsuchimikado Harutora either?"

"No. It's really hard to think that Tsuchimikado Harutora would stay quiet to his friends for a whole year, given his personality. Is he really Yakou?" Yashamaru mused, looking at the ceiling. Kurahashi didn't say anything at all, continuing to look at the papers before him.

Just then.

A weak vibration sounded. Kurahashi stopped the work at hand and took out his phone. It seemed that a phone call had come.

"Who?"

"Yamashiro."

Kurahashi looked at the time while preparing to take the phone. It was probably a regular report. Yashamaru leisurely reached his hand to the newspaper on the table with an indifferent appearance.

But.....

"What?" Kurahashi's voice wasn't like usual. He was audibly shaken.

The action of Yashamaru's hand as it reached out for the newspaper was relaxed, lacking tension as always.

But after he heard that voice, his expression became different from before, flashing with a sharp light.

Kurahashi continued the conversation, glued to the phone.

Yashamaru sat up properly on the sofa, straightening his body and putting his hands on his knees. His white gloves covered his fingers and slowly clasped tightly together before him. He waited like that.

"Understood, I'll send people to deal with it immediately. But it will be evening at the earliest. Until then, I'm counting on you." Kurahashi hung up the phone.

Yashamaru spoke in an erratic tone.

"Who?" The same question as before, but in a tone several times more pressing than before.

Kurahashi spoke bitterly and helplessly.

"We've found out that Tsuchimikado Harutora recently made a brief visit to the Seishuku Temple. Things are really developing in a bad direction....."

Part 2

Clouds still hadn't appeared by dawn, but by noon clouds had already covered the sky above them.

In the end, no one was paying attention to the weather even if the clouds enveloped Seishuku Temple. That was because clouds even denser than the ones in the sky were swirling inside the monastery.

Tsuchimikado Harutora was coming.

At first, that information had been banned from being discussed among Jougen's group of ajari. But by the time breakfast had finished cooking, that matter was being quietly discussed among the 'disciples'. Then, it spread to every corner of the monastery like piled-up dominoes collapsing.

The rumor that the boy was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation had reached the isolated Seishuku Temple from the world. The person who had brought forth commotion in the magic community since last year. That person's appearance wasn't something that could simply be called an 'incident', as anyone in the monastery could realize.

Then, at noon. The first clash finally exploded in the monastery.

The location was the main hall's courtyard. In front of an audience gathered inside the courtyard, Rian asked Jougen for the truth of the situation.

Was Tsuchimikado Harutora coming?

"I heard he was already here." Jougen replied uncharacteristically.

"He's a criminal wanted by the Onmyou Agency." Rian shouted and ran towards him from inside the courtyard.

Jougen listened to Rian's reply, his voice clearly very unsettled.

"Fortunately, there are Divine Generals in the monastery right now. It's a divine blessing. We'll use all our power to capture him and give him to the Onmyou Agency."

"Ridiculous!" Jougen faced Rian, speaking with an ice-cold tone from the very beginning.

"This monastery does not refuse anyone, no matter who they are. Also, even those Divine Generals must comply with the monastery rules when they are here."

"Don't be ridiculous! You can't even be flexible in this kind of situation?"

"No matter what the circumstances are, 'this place' is truly different from the outside. In the first place, if we follow the rules of outsiders, there will be no newcomers to the mountain. There are quite a few criminals here already. The first people we ought to hand over to the Onmyou Agency are our own people."

"That's just sophistry! The Onmyou Agency accepted us, and didn't they make us a proposal? But Tsuchimikado Harutora wasn't in it. We're the comrades of the Onmyou Agency, but he's an enemy! We should do our best to capture him to gain the Onmyou Agency's favor!"

"Enemies and comrades make no sense from your ajari mouth. We never refuse anyone who comes to this monastery. Even for the Onmyou Agency and Tsuchimikado Harutora, this monastery will treat them equally no matter how they fight with each other."

"Enough is enough! Alright? Isn't this a good opportunity? Supposing we're able to restrain him here, it would be a great favor for the Onmyou Agency. It could be a huge benefit for our future."

"As an ajari, you shouldn't keep making trouble by complaining. Rian, you're extremely disappointing."

"Priest Jougen!?"

"That's enough!"

Jougen snorted in contempt at Rian's attempt to persuade him. His half-narrowed eyes looked at Rian, their gaze as intense as fire. Even if his old bones were

wrapped in robes, he made the younger Rian feel as if he were being pressed down on by quite a bit of strength. Rian clicked his tongue and Jougen suddenly raised his eyebrows, his eyes full of killing intent.

All of the monks and 'disciples' watching this held their breath as they looked at the dispute between the two.

Then,

"......Excuse us."

The atmosphere in the area changed.

The three from the Twelve Divine Generals had appeared. They had probably heard the clamor.

Miyoshi stood in the front with his two hands behind his back, looking as hard to figure out what he was thinking as always. Yuge and Yamashiro waited by his sides, and both had bitter, solemn expressions.

The emergence of the Divine Generals threw the people in the monastery off balance.

But some of the ajaris' expression stiffened as their bodies swelled with magical energy. They took stances in preparations for a clash.

Their faces showed that they were resolved to not hesitate once something happened, even if it spurred on a magic battle.

Moreover, the Divine Generals also had their resolve.

...At the same time, the Divine Generals and the ajaris' inconsistent opinions were clearly laid out on a pedestal.

As if things would explode at the slightest touch.

However, Jougen still looked at Miyoshi with a proud attitude in the tension-filled air.

"Another disturbance again. I'm extremely sorry for all of this."

Jougen bowed his head as he said this, his robes swaying.

In the end, although he bowed his head in apology, the other side didn't feel a deferring attitude at all. Without missing a beat, Jougen supported his apparent strength with 'etiquette'. A decisive attitude he took up because his opponents were inferior to himself.

"Please don't be concerned." Then, Miyoshi replied extremely politely.

"Rather, the source of this commotion is the matter that you received prior notice of Tsuchimikado Harutora's arrival, right? Is that the case?"

"Indeed."

"Is that true?"

"Well. This insignificant monk[38] doesn't really....."

"Are you sure, Priest?"

"Hoh. I have no idea why you believe that. .....This insignificant monk just wants to maintain the status quo."

"Do you know the goal of the other side?"

"It wasn't mentioned in the message."

"When did he say he would come?"

"The message wrote 'today'."

"He is coming quite quickly."

"It's as you say."

Miyoshi and Jougen concisely confirmed with each other.

Neither side showed an attitude of facing an ally. But from the point of view of a third party, the brief conversation indeed supplanted the awkward atmosphere. But the tense atmosphere present wasn't alleviated at all, and the tension in the atmosphere increased instead.

"......Tch!? Miyoshi-san! Please speak for us. This concerns both the Onmyou Agency and Seishuku Temple." The restless Rian, no longer able to express arrogance, approached Miyoshi.

Miyoshi's expression didn't change as his gaze shot towards Rian.

Then, Jougen opened his mouth this time.

"People of the Onmyou Agency. I understand your position, but even if you are in esteemed positions right now, you are still visitors. You need not speak about the matters of this monastery." Jougen announced resolutely in a calm tone.

"....."

Yuge turned her wrist, forming a hand seal, and Yamashiro rapidly surveyed the surroundings. He moved his body slightly, making preparations to act at any moment. The exorcist and the Mystical Investigator entered a state of battle together.

But,

"That's true." Miyoshi slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"We were dispatched as envoys, or actually 'emissaries'. Though we are civil workers belonging to the Onmyou Agency, the circumstances right now are slightly different. Right now, we shall follow your customs."

"What!?" Rian groaned.

"You flatter me." Jougen smiled slightly.

A serious declaration.

The tense atmosphere alleviated a bit. But Yuge hadn’t relaxed. Even if she released her hand seal, she sighed deeply.

On the other hand, the others were the same as being unable to relax from just that. Jougen and Rian confronted each other, the sound of their teeth gnashing practically audible. Then, Miyoshi stared at Jougen. After that, Miyoshi averted his gaze and finally faced Yamashiro.

Needless to say, Yamashiro and Rian had been unable to respond to this occasion. He had been seen as immature by the Divine Generals again. Yamashiro's calm expression never changed.

But the moment he heard Miyoshi's words,

"...Tch." He clicked his tongue quietly.

But everyone present knew that this definitely wasn't over. That was because Tsuchimikado Harutora still hadn't appeared.

The clouds filling the sky hadn't dissipated because of this first clash. Rather, their density slowly and steadily increased.

☆

As expected of that day, even the monastery chores were far from routine.

Though Jougen's faction - in short, the conservative ajari - kept up their normal actions, they couldn't hide how much they were shaken even by reproaching those below them. The fact that lunch preparations were completed smoothly seemed like a miracle. Most of the 'disciples' stopped working and training afterwards.

Of course, Akino was also restless.

She hadn't thought that 'that' terrorist would come to their monastery.....

To be honest, she was truly terrified. Though there were many people in the monastery with powerful magic, they couldn't be careless. If a magic battle broke out in the monastery, she wasn't sure how much damage would come of it.

People might get hurt - or maybe even killed - because of that. She felt extremely terrified just from imagining it.

Even so, the factor that made Akino the most anxious was Hokuto.

Hokuto had clearly been strange since she had learned that Tsuchimikado Harutora was going to visit the monastery. Though she hadn't done much yet, she seemed absent-minded.

After noontime, Akino and the newcomer Hokuto, who were at the bottom of the food chain, quickly cleaned up lunch amidst the seniors. During this time, they heard about the dispute that occurred in the courtyard between Jougen and Rian. Hokuto finally became restless when she heard of the fight. Also, even when Hokuto silently looked at Akino like before, Akino felt chills from her ice-cold gaze. It was like when she had confronted Jougen in the morning. A solemn attitude as if she were ready for war.

Then, in the end,

"Sorry, Akino. I'm going to go see."

Apologizing, she abandoned her chores while walking to see the situation in the courtyard. Akino had also been with her at the time with a worried look.

... 'I came here with a goal'.

Hokuto had said that this morning. If her goal was related to Tsuchimikado Harutora, then she had only said that because Tsuchimikado Harutora would appear at the monastery.

After parting with Hokuto, Akino slowly finished cleaning up alone. Then, she moved to the courtyard as if escaping from the noisy atmosphere inside the temple.

She headed towards the place she always went. In the direction of the dilapidated temple. On the third step of the stairs attached to the temple floor was Sen, smoking a pipe. Akino's steps faltered as she approached, but Sen still noticed her.

"Oh, Akino, are your chores done?" His voice stopped.

Even in this kind of time, Sen was the same as always. Akino herself was also shocked at how Sen was able to be this at ease.

"Yeah." The voice she replied with gained a bit of vigor.

"Sen-jiichan, here, water."

"It's almost out, huh."

"Tobacco is really precious, it'll be gone if you keep smoking it."

"Ah, well, it's just once in a while." Sen replied in an extremely rare instance of embarrassment, his beard concealing his moving mouth.

He let go of the pipe he was smoking and blew out thin smoke. He looked different from usual because the monastery was so clamorous.

Akino moved next to him and Sen made room. Akino also slowly sat down on the step the old man sat cross-legged on.

Though they were inside the monastery, there was no difference between their surroundings and the outside mountain. Old cedar trees were lined up, growing on the empty exposed ground. In the first place, it was a place that sunlight wouldn't even reach during the day, and it was even darker because of the clouds. The cry of a mountain bird came from somewhere, echoing deep within the mountains.

"Hah~" Akino sighed.

"......Sen-jiichan, have you heard? Tsuchimikado Harutora will be visiting today."

"Oh, I knew since yesterday that we would have a guest since everyone's in such an uproar."

"Is it alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"After all, isn't that person a bad man? I wonder what will happen if that kind of person comes."

"....."

Akino spoke anxiously. In contrast, Sen smiled cheerfully.

"Akino, didn't you know? There are all sorts of 'evil people' in this monastery. You're also 'evil' in some sense." Sen leisurely smoked as he spoke.

"......Me and Sen-jiichan too?"

"Of course. This old man is able to eat every day thanks to his 'evil' companions in the monastery. So this old man is also the same."

Sen's words suddenly made Akino confused.

"But....." The topic continued.

"'Good' and 'evil' are words relative to the time, place, and position. For example, Akino. Have you thought of whether killing animals is 'evil'?"

"Eh, but, of course....."

"Then what if that animal is a poisonous snake? What about a bee that attacks people or a wild beast that destroys fields? If we didn't have clear rules about

hunting, killing would be 'evil', right? But should we reproach people eradicating things harmful to them as 'evil'?"

"That's because people are being hurt, right? They were wrong."

"Is that so? That's all spoken from the position of humans. From the position of those animals, aren't the humans that kill them 'evil'? Hunting too, we actually kill the livestock we eat as well. Standards of good and evil are different depending on various circumstances and reasons."

"I guess."

Sen smiled upon seeing Akino who didn't know how to react.

The so-called 'good' and 'evil' are also affected by circumstances, reasons, and factors. Things like murder are 'good' during wartime and are common during wars. Similarly, the 'evil' outside and the 'evil' inside the monastery naturally change depending on the circumstances. The ways we express our reasons are different too.

Akino frowned at Sen's words. She hadn't heard such words, and she felt a bit happy as a result.

"......Anyway, Sen-jiichan, so you could say that Tsuchimikado Harutora isn't a bad person?"

"Depending on what you judge to be 'evil'."

"......I don't know."

"Haha..." Sen laughed again, continuing to smoke the pipe in his mouth.

She was being teased. Akino stared at Sen, pouting her cheeks. Her mood had become quite a bit happier.

It was a question that Akino didn't know the answer to in the first place. No, it wasn't just Akino. The others in the monastery were also feeling restless because

they didn't know. If they had never known, thinking and worrying were inevitable things. Of course, there was almost nothing that she could do.

But Akino, who had regained her cheerful expression, immediately became gloomy again after hearing Sen's next words.

"Come to think of it, how's the newcomer today? Is she still with you?"

Akino's shoulder suddenly slumped. Her ears seemed to almost touch the ground.

"Woah!" Sen put on a shocked expression.

"What's wrong? Did you fight?"

"......No, but....."

Hokuto had come here with a 'goal', and that secret was something that was only between the two of them. She couldn't tell Sen.

Akino stopped herself from revealing the secret that she was a dragon living spirit - even if the person in question didn't care.

So,

"......How should I put it? Hokuto became extremely concerned when she heard the news about Tsuchimikado Harutora. She's by herself watching the movements in the surroundings right now."

"I see, she left you behind and went out by herself."

"T-That's not it."

Akino instantly denied it. But maybe it could be expressed that way. That kind of irritation felt too superficial compared to Hokuto, Tsuchimikado Harutora, and the groundless news that might seriously trouble the temple's future.

Akino's face reddened.

Then,

"That's great." Sen said this upon seeing the flushed Akino.

"Eh? W-What?"

"You only met the day before, but she knows your secret and she's deliberately avoiding you. That's probably because she thinks of you as a 'friend'."

Akino frowned while blinking as this was said of her.

...Yeah.

Indeed, the anxiety that the current Akino felt was something she had never felt before. This was anxiety that she only had because she was a friend.

Hokuto had left her pain. She had managed to become happy. That was the main reason she felt anxious at Tsuchimikado Harutora's arrival.

Hokuto had managed to put her pain behind and become friends with Akino. Because they were friends, she was still unable to get over those feelings.

"Alright, alright, since Akino doesn't have experience, let me teach you a way to make friends."

"Eh, what is it.....!?"

"Well. It isn't anything too hard. Alright? Take all the hateful things, the tough things, the painful things and troubles, and properly convey your thoughts to the other person without enduring them on your own. Make your feelings clear."

".....Feelings.....?"

"Yeah. Convey happy, joyful things to the other person at the same time. All you need to do is properly convey your feelings of treasuring her. Don't be shy and don't feel bothersome."

"....."

An obvious, ordinary suggestion without any sentiment behind it at all. But at the same time, maybe she recognized it again as those words pointed out.

I heard that Hokuto wanted to become friends with Akino no matter what you did.

Why had Akino run out without saying anything at all, and why had she entrusted her with such things. She didn't have any idea what Hokuto was thinking of. That made Akino feel even more agonized.

Then, she would convey those feelings of hers and definitely hear Hokuto's reply. Maybe Hokuto wouldn't even be able to respond, but even so, she would know what her friend thought.

Akino went speechless.

Her depressed self slowly regained its vigor. Her eyes sparkled.

"Sen-jiichan, thanks, I'll go find Hokuto."

After saying that, Akino sprinted out without even waiting for a reply.

The soles of her shoes struck the ground hard and she accelerated in a flash. She sprinted like the wind as if to take off. Her figure instantly vanished in the forest. Sen chuckled, tenderly watching Akino's departing back.

He inhaled smoke.

"......Hokuto....."

"That's also fate, I guess." Sen said suggestively.

☆

Yamashiro was a Mystical Investigators. Even if the practitioners in Seishuku

Temple were rather peculiar, it was impossible for him not to see that Tsuchimikado Harutora was going to visit in this kind of commotion. Originally, one of the goals Yamashiro and the others had for coming to this dark temple was to gather information regarding Tsuchimikado Harutora.

However,

"......So, in the end we haven't accomplished either 'gathering information' or 'arresting'."

They immediately questioned him after returning to their quarters. It couldn't be inferred what Miyoshi was thinking from his reply.

It wasn't just Yamashiro, Yuge was also stunned. She shook her head, unable to take it.

"Hold on, Officer Miyoshi. Aren't you being a bit too unreasonable? Tsuchimikado Harutora is a magic criminal wanted by the Mystical Investigators. If he appears in Seishuku Temple, we couldn't possible pretend that we didn't see him."

"Then Yuge, what do you say we should do? Do you think you can capture him?"

Yuge became upset when this question was returned to her.

It was very possible that Tsuchimikado Harutora was Yakou's reincarnation, which was the reason the Onmyou Agency viewed him as dangerous. Moreover, it wasn't just that he was a magic criminal, it might have political implications as well.

But judging from the several incidents this year, they could ascertain that Tsuchimikado was quite a powerful magic user. Even if it was unclear whether the two defensive shikigami he brought around were the true Hishamaru and Kakugyouki, it was certain that they were two very powerful shikigami. It was impossible to capture him easily.

But,

"......I don't plan on showing weakness. I don't plan on overstating my ability, but at the same time I don't plan on being excessively modest."

Yuge was no exception among the Twelve Divine Generals. She was an Independent Exorcists who could easily purify a spiritual disaster. Moreover, Yuge had the name of 'Binding Princess' and was an absolutely first-rate barrier user. The job of 'capturing' suited her perfectly.

The key point that Miyoshi had mentioned rested on Yuge's ability.

"Yuge, this is Seishuku Temple, you know?"

Jougen, who led Seishuku Temple, had openly declared his intentions of welcoming Tsuchimikado Harutora. With that, the probability that Seishuku Temple would try to stop them once Miyoshi and the other Onmyou Agency people expressed their intent of arresting Tsuchimikado Harutora was very high.

They were outnumbered like this. Even if Yuge could defend, they couldn't win if Seishuku Temple's capable people surrounded them. Especially Jougen, who Miyoshi had hailed as 'a person far more powerful than us'.

"Then."

Yamashiro quickly interjected.

"Let's let things move in Jougen's direction and pull Rian who spoke out before over to our side. If we have him become the leader and split Seishuku Temple in two, we might be able to limit them from getting involved in other things."

"Priest Rian, huh? Is he that respected in the monastery?"

Miyoshi spoke indifferently. He seemed to be uninterested, or perhaps Rian was just that shallow. Yamashiro smirked.

"I'll express our support. If he has the Onmyou Agency backing him, there might be a good amount of people who choose our side instead of Jougen's. ...But, there's no time. This job ought to have been completed by the Mystical

Investigators, and this time I'd like to request support from Officer Miyoshi and Independent Officer Yuge."

Tsuchimikado Harutora's message had stated that he was going to come today. In the first place, they couldn't distinguish whether that message was true for false, but even if Tsuchimikado Harutora didn't come, this could develop into an opportunity for his work inside Seishuku Temple to progress.

But Miyoshi didn't nod.

"Yamashiro, it's good for young people to be motivated, but Chief Kurahashi will get angry if you go too far."

Yamashiro's relaxed expression vanished. He couldn't distinguish what 'level' of a suggestion Miyoshi's remark was.

Miyoshi was unconcerned about the young Mystical Investigator's reaction.

"I said just now, the three of us are emissaries and will follow their customs. 'Arresting people' isn't an action that we here have to take."

"......You knew?"

"No, I didn't know. But I can imagine that that person has begun preparing very quickly already."

Yamashiro smiled politely at the calmly-speaking Miyoshi.

"What's going on?" Yuge questioned Yamashiro, unable to understand what the two were talking about.

"I've reported everything regarding Tsuchimikado Harutora's visit to Chief Kurahashi. As Officer Miyoshi predicted, reinforcements should be heading here right now."

"What?"

"Why didn't you say that earlier." Yuge stared at Yamashiro in surprise.

"Sorry, Independent Officer, it's because it was my Mystical Investigator work. But the reinforcements will arrive this evening at the earliest. So it's not guaranteed that they'll be here at the critical time. I mean to say that we should be of use if possible. I won't deny it even if you say that I'm getting carried away."

Yamashiro spoke straightforwardly. He no longer had any intent of concealing it. Yuge wore a displeased expression. Even if he lowered his head, it didn't make her feel any better. All of that was within Yamashiro's calculations.

"Anyway, if reinforcements are coming, then we can't descend the mountain first. Let's stay as we are."

"Officer Miyoshi, to be honest, it might indeed be getting carried away, but we can't just wait and leave everything to the reinforcements, that's not wise. Since the three of us have the advantage of being onsite, we really ought to act when we can."

"Rejected."

"Why?"

"That's obvious, it's because it's too dangerous."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing but the literal meaning. The two of you might be fine, but what if something happens to me?"

Yamashiro didn't really understand even after being told this.

Yamashiro was a bit stunned. Yuge furrowed her brows, and on the other hand, Miyoshi was still as calm as always. In contrast to them, he spoke leisurely with a 'this is troublesome' tone.

"This is troublesome. The two of you, listen up, especially you, Yuge. I hope you can realize the reason you were chosen for this mission."

"Hah..... huh?"

"Isn't it something you can realize with just a bit of thought? It was to protect me. No matter what, I'm a Special Senser, a human resource that never fails in jobs like detecting magic, right? I was chosen as an envoy, and at the same time, you were chosen as an envoy as a barrier-user for nothing other than protecting me with your life."

"No, that....."

"You were only dispatched to guarantee my safety. Otherwise, how would they have put an Independent Exorcist who was very busy in the first place on this kind of remote mountain?"

"....."

Those words - 'very busy Independent Exorcist' were indeed true, and she also had to admit that what Miyoshi said was probably the case.

The Special Senser Miyoshi Tougo's abilities were the 'treasure' of the Onmyou Agency. It was a fragile treasure that was unable to fight and even lacked the ability to protect itself. It was a reasonable or even natural measure to place powerful 'shields' next to him.

But she was powerless to refute it when the person in question said so magnanimously that 'Yamashiro and Yuge, I'm a greater, more valuable person than you, so I need you to protect me'. It was like an emperor proclaiming a command to his servant.

"How unreliable. Come on, Yuge, really?"

".....Alright....."

"...Well, Yamashiro, Yuge and I have to refrain from foolish actions that provoke those around us. I won't force you to stop if you want to act no matter what, but if you're planning on pulling over Priest Rian without any hesitation like you said, I urge you to calmly wait instead."

It was truly shameless, but Miyoshi lectured Yamashiro without any remorse. Yamashiro also thought seriously for a long time over whether he was being taken for an idiot.

The conversation in the quarter was enveloped in silence. Only two of them were restless.

Suddenly, the third person,

"Ah."

Clapped his hands as if seeming to think of something and slowly turned towards Yamashiro.

"Come to think of it, I forgot it during yesterday's confusion, there's something I want to confirm."

"What is it?"

"The forbidden magic Tsuchimikado Harutora is suspected of using was indeed the Taizan Fukun Ritual, right?"

"......Is that so?"

He didn't understand Miyoshi's intent at all up to this point. But that said, he couldn't ignore it. Yamashiro replied seriously.

Miyoshi heard Yamashiro's reply and thought quickly.

"I see. That's unexpected, but of course I might have guessed wrong. It's very hard to determine the location."

"....."

"......Officer Miyoshi? Excuse me..... What do you mean....."

Quite weary, Yamashiro's voice started becoming impatient as he questioned. This was an experience of being mistreated at the hands of an irritating boss,

albeit the fact that he was a National First-Class Onmyouji.[39] Those hands also made his patience drop to its very bottom limits because of their pressure.

Miyoshi's momentary daze ended in a posed proclamation.

"Good timing, Yamashiro. I urged you to wait before. Let me give you some advice on why you ought to do so."

☆

"Why is it like this, Rian? Shouldn't the Onmyou Agency be backing us?"

"Also, is the matter of welcoming Tsuchimikado Harutora really seen as decided in the monastery because of the dispute earlier!?"

"The moderate ajari turned to Jougen and the others..... If we just recognize him as Yakou reborn, won't we have no time to make our case?"

The reformist ajari gathered in Rian's quarters, criticizing their leader with paled faces one after another. Actually, Rian had completely lost the dispute in the courtyard before. Thanks to him, their plans had been completely disrupted.

But,

"There's nothing we can do anymore, right? We didn't predict that Tsuchimikado Harutora would come here at all. We definitely can't ignore that."

"Even so, there's no meaning in making the situation of Jougen's side better! Also, what's with the stance that those Twelve Divine Generals had taken?"

"That's because the Mystical Investigator Yamashiro fled! If that brat had a bit of courage before, the result would have been completely different. Damn, that guy could have just..... In the end, he's just an errand boy. I was truly foolish to hold expectations of him."

Rian spat bitterly.

In any case, Tsuchimikado Harutora's arrival and the acceptance of this in the courtyard meant that Rian and the other reformists had truly been caught in a dilemma. They had to regretfully admit that they hadn't gotten the best end of the bargain.

But,

"Let's end this. We have a message from Kurahashi Genji, the Onmyou Agency chief. The Onmyou Agency that he leads dominates the magic community - and always will in the future. Even Jougen and Yakou's reincarnation won't be obstacles."

Rian surveyed the faces of his comrades as he spoke devoted, enthusiastic words.

Of course, even if Rian had ambitions and desires, he had considered playing it safe.

But above that, Seishuku Temple ought to pick the correct choice, join with the Onmyou Agency, and open up the temple.

The other ajari had no way of guaranteeing their lives other than that. Onmyou law was being changed, and the Onmyou Agency's power was currently spreading all the way over here. They were rightly aware of the current situation.

In the first place, it couldn't be said that the people living at Seishuku Temple were truly 'living'. Compared to people on the outside, why was it that only they were practitioners, and why did they have to be forced into this kind of unfree 'life'? Even for their magic training, maybe they needed to learn the latest theoretical approaches of the Onmyou Agency rather than stubbornly using their stratified methods from before.

The proposition of Jougen's conservative faction meant nothing at all. They were just purely afraid that change would happen.

"The Divine Generals from before assented to Jougen's words. But that definitely wasn't their true feelings. Yamashiro probably thinks the same about that. It's understandable that they find it difficult to act. Then we need to do something to make it more convenient for them to move."

Rian spoke to his companions - and also to himself.

"If we're successful, we'll be able to grant the Onmyou Agency a 'favor'. .....Right, this is actually an opportunity. Right now, we have to muster our courage and act. Like that, we'll carve the names of us reformists in the long history of Seishuku Temple. It's perfect. Everyone, prepare yourselves."

"....."

Part 3

Akino ran like the wind to the monastery.

Tap - at the same time she leaped off the ground, her small body flew like an arrow, the wind she whipped up made the fallen leaves dance. She fearlessly flew into the flowing scenery.

Rabbit ears had grown from her head at some point in time. A short, round rabbit tail also grew from her bottom. However, Akino didn't realize - or maybe she just didn't care - as she continued to run.

She searched for Hokuto starting from one end of the hall inside the monastery temple. At that time, the ears on her head suddenly changed its direction intensely, and she set out to find Hokuto's presence.

She suddenly accelerated.

Normally, she would try not to run in the monastery, since she would be scolded for being 'dangerous'. But right now, those things no longer mattered. She was unconcerned about the obstacles on the road as well. With a hop, she jumped over

the top of a stone lantern. With a swish, she swiftly passed over a fallen tree, her gaze jumping in all directions as she searched for Hokuto. Crunch crunch crunch - after she tread rhythmically on fallen leaves, she crouched her body low and leaped past a small, ancient pond. Most people were just watching from afar, so they didn't notice Akino. If they noticed the aura and came to check it out, Akino was long since gone from the area by the time they arrived. The girl ran through the monastery without being scolded by anyone.

She sensed the heavy atmosphere in the monastery as she ran here and there again.

One thing she could understand was that anxiety and confusion had emerged on everyone's faces.

Even the ajari and seniors who were usually egotistic had become frightened, restless, and troubled by the imminent changes. Huge things had to be waiting for them in the future. It was a big event that could drag in even Akino, who could do nothing at all regardless, along with the powerful ajari and seniors.

However, Akino had stopped worrying. She ran lightly, yet freely, like a gust of wind.

She had looked around the entire temple but hadn't found Hokuto. Could it be that she had already left the monastery? The anxiety that suddenly overflowed from her heart made her chest tighten. But Akino immediately shook her head, denying her suspicions.

Hokuto wasn't someone who wouldn't even inform her friends even if she did leave the monastery. Though she had only known her for a short amount of time, she understood at least that much about her personality. Since she wasn't in the temple, then she would just have to thoroughly search in other places. Akino picked up her speed, running to and fro in the monastery.

After running everywhere and searching once, Akino finally spotted Hokuto when she returned to the area behind the hall she had been at earlier. She was

surprised. She hadn't thought Hokuto would be with the monastery shikigami - with that Tengu.

The place the two of them were was the very end of the monastery. The cedar trees suddenly parted in that area, leaving behind a broad, open space. Since the ground had crumbled from heavy rains the previous year, a large fissure had parted the forest there. Though it wasn't very steep, the surface of the ground was clearly revealed.

Before her was a large swath of ferns. Akino accelerated with all her strength and leaped.

Thump - in a flash, she jumped to a trunk of a cedar tree. Thump, thump - then, like that, she jumped from one trunk to another, leaping above the group of ferns as if performing acrobatics.

She flew like a cannonball towards the place Hokuto and Tengu were.

Akino suddenly flying out from the trees made Hokuto turn around and cry "Ah!?" out of shock. Akino still landed with her accelerated speed. She skidded on the ground while doing her best to keep her balance and not fall down.

"...Ah, ouch!"

She failed and tumbled in the other direction.

It really hurt.

"......O-Ow....."

"Ah, Akino!? What happened to you? A-Are you alright?"

Hokuto ran towards Akino, who had fallen from the sky. She came in contact with the same sweet aroma as before. A big bump had risen on the back of Akino's head. She called out "Hokuto....." while sitting up. Fortunately, her glasses hadn't broken from the fall.

"Sorry. I started running without even knowing it when I was looking for you, Hokuto."

"Looking for me? What happened?"

"It's not like that..... Ah, but why are you in this kind of place, Hokuto? Also--"

Come to think of it, Akino who had been constantly looking up at Hokuto turned her gaze in Tengu's direction.

"Why are you with Tengu-san? Did Tengu-san say something again?"

The shikigami called Tengu was standing with a tengu mask tied around his head like always. He stood in a position slightly further away from the two. His expression couldn't be seen on the face on his huge, abnormal body because of the tengu mask. His figure seemed like a mountain-dwelling monster in the deep cedar forest below the dim sky.

Of course, he was a familiar shikigami to Akino. Although she wasn't wary of him..... The incident yesterday night.....

Hokuto also seemed confused.

"Well, I'm not too sure. This shikigami suddenly appeared when I was returning after checking the situation in the monastery..... It beckoned for me to come without saying anything, and then I just came to look."

Hokuto's expression when she had seen Tengu had been even more confused than Akino's. Then, the Tengu that had called her over had stood there without doing anything after all. Akino raised her eyebrows.

Indeed, Tengu often just stood still like that or wandered the monastery when he wasn't following anyone's instructions. Sometimes he would also climb trees and stand on the tree branches in complete silence.

But she had never heard of him calling someone over like this. Of course, that being said, she had seen Tengu speaking for the first time last night. What exactly

had happened? Akino stared at Tengu while listening carefully and furrowing her bros.

"Then Akino, why are you here? You even said you were looking for me."

"Eh? Ah, that's because....."

Akino faltered for a moment upon being asked about this again. She lost the momentum that she had run all the way here with and felt a bit embarrassed instead.

She couldn't be like this. If she equivocated here, her words would have come to nothing.

"Because I-I'm very concerned about Hokuto."

"Eh? W-Why?"

"Because you became very strange after you learned that that Tsuchimikado Harutora person was coming, Hokuto. How is that related to the 'goal' you talked about?"

Once Akino confirmed it directly, Hokuto's tone started to waver. As expected, it was the case. Akino breathed in and continued speaking.

"Hokuto, you seem like you're in an urgent situation right now. It's more like you've been forced into a corner than just not having any freedom to act."

"You..... You could see it?"

Akino nodded honestly to Hokuto's question.

"So I'm very worried about you. That's why I came to find you. Because--"

Akino choked up as she spoke.

"We're... friends....."

Her face was hot. She was probably already red. Her heart thumped as it leaped and her ears also trembled slightly.

"Akino....." Hokuto was very surprised. She closed her mouth tightly and turned her face away. Hesitation and indecision were written on the side of her face. Though Hokuto didn't say anything, Akino could see that her heart was conflicted.

Akino didn't say anything either, waiting for Hokuto's reply. Hokuto's hesitation slowly turned into decisiveness under Akino's gaze.

Then,

".....It's as you say, Akino."

Hokuto nodded and admitted.

"I came to the dark temple because I learned that he would come here through my father's divination. I came here to meet with him."

".....Is that Tsuchimikado Harutora person your friend?"

"Yes. I'm....."

"Tsuchimikado."

Tengu suddenly spoke. The two of them turned in the shikigami's direction in surprise.

The tengu mask was on the shikigami's face, so needless to say it was very difficult to read his expression or even his gaze. But right now, they could clearly sense that the shikigami was looking at the two of them.

Tengu slowly raised its thick, long arm.

"Look."

He pointed at Hokuto.

"Hokuto, possessing, dead person."

"....."

Hokuto's eyes widened as she gazed at Tengu. Akino continued listening in confusion to the dialogue between Hokuto and Tengu.

"Hokuto is, Tsuchimikado family's, dragon."

"......Why do you know this? You, what are you....."

"Corpse is, Tsuchimikado family's, kin, right?"

Tengu questioned. Akino instantly looked up at Hokuto.

Hokuto, noticing Akino's gaze, turned her face from Tengu to Akino and smiled calmly. Then, she turned back to Tengu's direction, straightening her back and drawing up her chest.

Her expression tightened. Hokuto replied nobly to the shikigami's question, her black hair and the ribbon tied in it swaying.

"Yes. I won't hide it any longer. My name is Tsuchimikado Natsume. I was adopted by the Tsuchimikado main family not long after birth and was raised as the next family head. Tsuchimikado Harutora is my childhood friend."

"...!"

"Also..... It's true that I'm a dead person. Last summer, I was resurrected from death. .....No, I was just awakened, and right now I'm still barely maintaining my current state."

Those words that were half a confession to Akino continued.

It would be a lie to say that Akino wasn't surprised. She had received quite a shock. That was undeniable.

But,

"I see."

Akino spoke as if sighing. Hokuto froze in surprise.

"What."

"......Eh?"

"Hokuto, I thought your situation was scarier from how dramatic you were."

"......Ah, Akino?"

Hokuto seemed flustered at Akino who smiled rather than feeling tense. She had sincerely spoken the truth and completely conveyed it.

"Do you understand, Akino? I'm someone who was resurrected after dying once, you know? There's nothing more taboo than that. It was one of the most reviled forbidden arts..... An unforgivable thing. Akino, even you should....."

"Hey, Hokuto."

"...Eh?"

"Good and evil change depending on the time, occasion, and position. Hokuto might have died and been resurrected by a forbidden technique, but no one here cares about that kind of thing. Well, maybe there are people who care, but they won't say anything about it or do anything. Of course, I'm like that too."

Those words were all the truth.

The people in the monastery were diverse and varied. Also, no one was concerned about anyone's past. If someone had once died, then at most they might feel a bit uncomfortable around them, but the way they treated her wouldn't change. Maybe it was a bit different from the 'outside', but 'Seishuku Temple' was that kind of place.

The final destination of people with nowhere else to go. That was Seishuku Temple. So there were actually many people with various circumstances, pasts,

evils, and destinies living together in the monastery. Hokuto's 'fate' was just one of these.

More importantly, judging from the current circumstances, it seemed like Hokuto hadn't done anything incredible. It wasn't her fault for being born and raised, and she probably hadn't thought of and orchestrated something like her resurrection after death.

Then the Hokuto whom Akino recognized wasn't a liar or a villain, but the same Hokuto as always. That was the thing she was happiest about.

"So you don't need to blame yourself like that."

"B-But."

"No. Hokuto's such a beautiful and gentle and good person. Even if you're half alive or dead, Hokuto is Hokuto."

Akino spoke naturally and Hokuto stopped moving as if she had been struck.

Her beautiful eyes were so wide that they might pop out. Why were Akino's words able to touch her heart like this?

It seemed like she had properly conveyed them. Akino giggled shyly.

However,

"......So that's how it was."

The voice that suddenly arose didn't come from Tengu. Rather, it was the voice of a young man.

Akino and Hokuto suddenly spun around as if they had been struck. They looked at the cedar forest that Akino had just flown out from. On the other side of the swath of ferns that covered the roots of the trees stood a man in a suit.

"I truly have to admit. Miyoshi Tougo is truly very valuable."

The young man said this, taking out a charm.

"...Order."

As he said this, he placed the charm on his wrist. The placed charm ignited, instantly burning away the ferns.

Akino flinched in fright, drawing back her body. The young man slowly walked up the opened path.

That was first-class magic. The seniors also used fire magic when they were cooking. But the magic the young man controlled - while practical and a bit rough - was very effective, giving Akino an ominous premonition.

Hokuto quickly stepped forward in order to protect Akino. Only then did the shikigami called Tengu slowly turn around, but by then the young man saw only Hokuto. Hokuto took a confrontational stance with a resolute expression, watching calmly.

"Tsuchimikado Natsume."

The young man announced.

"I can't let up after hearing that name no matter what. Especially now that Tsuchimikado Harutora will be arriving soon."

Akino suddenly had a thought as she wondered who this person was. There were only three people in Seishuku Temple that Akino didn't recognize right now. Those were the Divine Generals dispatched by the Onmyou Agency. However, there was one woman among the three of them and one person who was older.

Then there was only one person remaining.

"I'm Yamashiro. A Mystical Investigator."

The young man gave his name.

"I don't know how important you are to Tsuchimikado Harutora..... But at least he deliberately used forbidden magic to resurrect you from death. You can probably become a bargaining chip. For now, I'll escort you back."

Hokuto's eyes instantly became sharp. In comparison, the young man's mouth curved into a mocking smile as he happily stepped out.

☆

A terraced mountain road was connected to Seishuku Temple.

An Onmyouji stood in front of this mountain road, raising his head to look at the mountaintop.

The mountain was covered with large, ancient cedar trees. The mountain top was enveloped in gray clouds. Even looking around casually, he could feel like it had been accumulating something for a long time from its awe-inspiring appearance. It felt like a remote mountain.

The Onmyouji nodded, muttering 'how nostalgic' as he turned to look behind his back.

An ancient warehouse-like structure stood there. It was a design completely different from the Front Hall that he had known, but it seemed to still bear the name.

Just then, a truck drove up next to the Front Hall. The Onmyouji's gaze returned to the North Star Mountain from before and he took out a cell phone.

"...Senpai? How is it over there?'

"They're already deployed."

"Understood. Then, I'm going over."

He ended the call, a calm smile surfacing on his face.

"You two, are you ready?"

"Of course."

"Yeah..."

The Onmyouji nodded at these invisible voices and then strode out.

Chapter 4 - Onmyouji at the Mountain

Part 1

It was the worst occasion to slip up. Natsume gritted her teeth, glaring at the suit-wearing young man - Yamashiro.

She had gone to such lengths to slip into the monastery concealing her identity, but her true self had been noticed by a National First-Class Onmyouji Mystical Investigator. That kind of thing was stupid as well as having the worst possible timing.

Yamashiro had surreptitiously drawn closer to Natsume. In other words, she was being watched to some degree. Natsume had avoided contact with the Divine Generals, and she originally thought she had concealed her aura quite well, but that had been too naive.

Though Natsume was angered at her inability, she immediately composed her feelings and focused on the situation before her. Fortunately, Harutora would appear at the dark temple today. She just needed to buy time until he appeared, and she had the magical tools that she needed for that.

.....Right. Even if the opponent was a Divine General. She could only take a shot. Natsume instantly adjusted her mind to an alert state, letting magical energy swell up from her entire body.

"......Hmph." Yamashiro snorted upon 'seeing' Natsume's state.

But on the other hand, Natsume couldn't ignore Akino whom she was sheltering behind her. Akino was tense, her body stiff. There was no helping that.

Though the 'disciples' of Seishuku Temple constantly underwent magical training, Natsume knew after being with Akino the whole day yesterday that she hadn't received training as a practitioner.

She couldn't involve her in this, and she had to consider the possibility that she would be captured to be used as a hostage. If possible, she wanted to change the location of the battle, but it was unknown whether she would have such an opportunity.

Then, there was one more thing to remember--

"......That Tengu probably isn't your shikigami."

Yamashiro slowly turned his gaze towards the tengu shikigami. Of course, Yamashiro had recognized the existence of this Tengu beforehand, and he had been able to conclude that the shikigami probably wasn't Natsume's.

"Could it be that brat's shikigami? She's quite a 'strange' kid, that's for sure."

Now that he mentioned it, Akino's rabbit ears were out. Akino went stiff, frightened by Yamashiro's tone.

Natsume immediately said, "...Tengu? Can I entrust Akino's safety to you?"

"H-Hokuto?"

Akino had said that the tengu shikigami obeyed the orders of people in the temple. Natsume had just entered them monastery, but this shikigami seemed quite familiar to Akino who had grown up in the monastery.

As expected, Tengu slowly nodded to express acquiescence. She was extremely grateful. But she couldn't just drop her guard like this. Tengu's strength was still unknown, and she wasn't sure how much she could entrust it with. Moreover,

"You're also quite strange, Tsuchimikado Natsume." Yamashiro said this to the intently-staring Natsume. Moreover, he used a leisurely, chatting tone. Natsume's expression became sharpened at Yamashiro's words.

"You stayed at the Onmyou Academy until last year, and you were together with Tsuchimikado Harutora in the forty-seventh class of students if I remember correctly. In other words, you guys are my kouhai. Actually, I was also a student of the Onmyou Academy, of the forty-fifth class."

Natsume fought back from letting her eyes twitch. A difference of two years, or in other words, this man had already been a third-year when Natsume had entered the academy. Though there was very little contact between first-years and upperclassmen, she ought to have heard something like rumors about someone with the level of ability to gain 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications.

Probably anticipating Natsume's suspicions, Yamashiro spoke.

"Originally, I no longer had anything to learn after my second year at the Onmyou Academy, but if I knew that someone from the Tsuchimikado family - or that Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation was entering the academy - it wouldn't have been bad to stay for another year. How regrettable."

"....."

That meant that he had left by the time Natsume and the others entered.

The Onmyou Academy graduates mostly entered the Onmyou Agency for work, and it wasn't strange for the Mystical Investigators to have academy graduates.

"How unexpected for fellow academy members to meet in this kind of 'filthy' monastery. How ironic."

A look of 'irony' also appeared on Yamashiro's face as he said this. It was indeed 'ironic', but Natsume didn't have the leisure for jokes like that. The opponent was a professional at human-targeted magic along with a Divine General. Natsume knew quite well exactly how strong their powers were.

"But why are you here? I was guessing that you were definitely acting together with Tsuchimikado Harutora. Did you come beforehand to do scouting work?"

"....."

"Well, whatever. We don't have that kind of time either."

Yamashiro said this to the completely-silent Natsume, also losing his interest in further pursuing the subject. Yamashiro had a clear confidence on his face since he started thinking, and Natsume judged that this wasn't 'faked'. It was a good sign that the enemy was careless.

Outside of its relation to Harutora, the fact that he mentioned the Onmyou Academy topic was probably because he was a bit interested in Natsume as an Onmyou Academy kouhai. She was truly grateful that she was being looked down on at this time.

"......H-Hokuto."

Akino called out quietly from behind her back.

Her body was shaking. Natsume's heart was filled with apology towards Akino. She had just been granted the goodwill of her naive, brilliant personality, and in the end she had pulled her into a troublesome situation. But those thoughts also stopped there. She had a duty to send her back safe and sound.

"Akino, leave me and run back to the monastery with the tengu shikigami. It's alright, you should be able to get there in a flash with your speed from before."

"How can I! I-I can't leave Hokuto here alone!"

Just as Akino tried to speak frantically.

"...!? Order!"

At the same time as Natsume instantly put up a defensive wall by throwing out a protective charm, the Unmoving Golden Chains that Yamashiro released hurtled towards her. The magical wall shook intensely because of the magic collision.

...So fast!?

He hadn't needed to speak an incantation, he hadn't formed a hand seal, and he hadn't refined any magical energy. Though the magic was relatively incomplete, the victor would probably be decided if she took one of those to the face.

"Hey, don't make me waste time for no reason."

As Yamashiro spoke with a calm tone, he casually shortened the distance between the two.

Akino's wails sounded from behind her. Natsume changed the position of her arm that maintained the magical wall while refining magical energy. Then, she threw out a second protective charm, but this time she interfered with and rewrote the magic. She connected the magic to the magical wall she had put up before. She purposefully 'disrupted' the magic.

"Deflect! Order!"

The magical wall from before instantly swelled up after absorbing the second protective charm. A projectile magic that attacked with a magical wall. She forced the magical wall to go out of control, and it defended against the Unmoving Golden Chains that constantly shot out while moving in the direction of the attacks.

"......Tch."

Yamashiro clicked his tongue while turning to avoid the magical wall. She let the out-of-control magical wall fly at him directly as a means of attack. It seemed that there wouldn't be enough time to deal with each and every magic she used. Yamashiro 'watched' Natsume with a cold gaze.

Natsume ran to the right in a flash in order to put some distance from Akino, taking advantage of the opening from interrupting the Unmoving Golden Chains. It was because Yamashiro wasn't the kind of opponent that Natsume could deal with while protecting Akino at the same time. The tengu shikigami started approaching Akino as it had promised, as if taking Natsume's place. Akino was

currently unable to move because of fear and nervousness, so it was better to have the shikigami move her to a safe place.

Yamashiro called out irritatedly:

"I said, don't make your senpai waste time for no reason, kouhai."

Yamashiro maintained his slightly forward-leaning posture as he said that, pursuing Natsume with agile steps.

He took out two charms from the front pocket of his suit and tossed them out. They were shikigami. Two completely blue catlike shikigami appeared. 'WA2 Cat Bandage', a Witchcraft Corporation binding shikigami that the Mystical Investigators commonly used. The two Cat Bandages leaped from the ground into a dash right after forming. Though they were just ordinary, commercial manmade shikigami, their aura and mobility were definitely on a different level under the control of a Divine General. The two split up to attack Natsume, like hunting lions.

Natsume ran while forming a seal. "Suzaku! Genbu! Byako! Koujin! Nanto! Hokuto! Sandai! Gyokujo! Seiryuu!"

Natsume suddenly stopped and turned her body, forming hand seals at the two shikigami. At the same time, a grid pattern filled with magical energy flashed with white light in front of Natsume. Kuji-kiri. Her black hair floated behind her as if blown by a strong wing. The two pouncing shikigami stopped because they collided with the kuji-kiri. But,

"Flow and bind. Order."

Yamashiro's attack came a split-second after the two shikigami were stopped. He held up a charm with two fingers, hurling the charm while chanting an incantation. It was a water-element charm. The magic became a torrent that rushed along the ground, approaching Natsume.

Though she reflexively wanted to take out a wood-element charm, Natsume immediately anticipated the entirety of the opponent's magic from the enemy's

goals and magic. She pulled out a metal-element charm, throwing it as if to scatter the approaching charm magic.

"Metal conquers wood! Order!"

The magical torrent Yamashiro had unleashed was about to crash down on top of Natsume. The instant she thought that, the torrent instantly became a net of vines. The net of vines carrying water-aura was a magic formed on the basis of the Five Elements Mutual Generation concept of 'water generates wood'.

But everything was broken off by the sharp shard of metal that the metal-element charm Natsume threw out turned into. Five Elements Conquering - metal conquers wood. However, the wood aura's might had been empowered because of its generation from the water aura, and Natsume's metal aura couldn't completely neutralize it. The cut vines started growing from their severed ends. The movement of the growing vines rushed towards Natsume as if flying through the air.

...In that case!

"Om bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Her fingers fluidly jumped from a Dharmacakra seal to a seal of magic binding. Unmoving Golden Chains. This time, the movement of the vines were finally stopped after that magic bound the opponent's magic.

But just then, the two Cat Bandages had already regained their mobility, and Yamashiro's next magic had already been released.

"Solidify and harden, Order!"

Yamashiro crouched down to stick a charm on the ground, an earth-element charm this time. Five Element Mutual Generation, the same as before. In other words, earth generates metal.

After she leaped back, sharp metal shards shot up from the place Natsume's feet had just been, and those earthen teeth constantly reached up as they pursued in the direction Natsume escaped.

The earth aura summoned by the magic became metal aura underground. As expected, it was the same Five Elements Mutual Generation as before. But it was no use even if she saw through the opponent's repeated magic. Right after Natsume avoided the attack from under her feet, the two blue cats immediately closed in on her from the left and right. Even if she could use the same defensive methods to neutralize the magic, she wouldn't be in time to deal with the two shikigami. Moreover, Yamashiro had already casually taken out the next charm.

His continuous, wanton waves of attacks were purely to seal Natsume's actions, and the follow-up attacks were just to back Natsume into a corner, not to deal with her instantly. His tactic was to apply pressure on her bit by bit, in order to keep her alive and not kill her.

...If that's what the opponent intends!

She would win with this. Natsume made her decision and stopped evading. She poured all her focus into her magic, refining magical energy, and forming a basic seal.

"Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

This was Acala's Fire Realm magic.

The flame that burst from Natsume's body swirled into a vortex centered on the girl. Her black hair lifted above her head, blown against gravity by the heat.

The metal aura's magical energy piercing through the ground dissipated harmlessly after encountering Natsume's flame. Fire conquers metal. The two approaching 'Cat Bandages' were also scorched and forced to retreat from the intense lag. The pillar of fire reaching into the sky began churning up the dim clouds. Yamashiro stopped.

"...Ho." Yamashiro narrowed his eyes and spoke. The cold, mocking smile had finally vanished from his face.

"...Makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

Natsume unleashed her ferocious Fire Realm magic at Yamashiro. At the same time, she cast stealth magic. From the start, she hadn't needed to defeat him. She just needed to escape until Harutora arrived.

Using the Fire Realm magic could also blind the opponent's eyes. As long as she took advantage of this period of time to escape into the mountain forest--

"You already want to escape? You're too naive, thinking you could win with that."

Yamashiro's voice came from the direction of the Fire Realm magic, and Natsume, who was about to run away, turned her head to 'see' Yamashiro without slowing down.

Yamashiro had put up a barrier to defend against the Fire Realm, and destroying it was completely impossible since she had completely released control of the Fire Realm magic. However, the fire realm magic she had poured all her strength into still sustained its power. Yamashiro ought to be unable to release the barrier and attack Natsume from inside the Fire Realm magic. She could escape! Natsume believed this.

Suddenly, something flew like an arrow from overhead. Reflected in Natsume's eyes after she spun towards it was the figure of a blue bird tearing through the clouds.

"A 'Swallow Whip'!?"

She wasn't in time to instantly evade it. When the blue swallow was about to crash into Natsume's chest, its longest feathers became whips that extended out to entangle Natsume's body.

"Ah!?"

Her feet left the ground and immediately afterwards, she felt the impact of falling down throughout her body.

The Swallow Whip was the representative binding shikigami that Mystical Investigators used, on par with the Cat Bandage. Just like its name implied, its feathers became whips that entwined around Natsume's body and bound her. Natsume struggled as if rolling on the ground.

When Natsume managed to struggle to her feet, she felt the Swallow Whip's wings extend and twine around her knees to bind its target. Come to think of it, Swallow Whip wings were set up with a weak Unmoving Golden Chains magic by default, which was low-powered in order to be activated frequently against the target. Once one was bound, it was difficult to escape.

...But, how? When had he used it!?

Natsume ought to have not been careless anywhere. There was no reason she shouldn't have noticed if Yamashiro had summoned a Swallow Whip.

But, "......I had it wait in the air before coming in contact with you. I have the upper hand now, right?"

The power of the Fire Realm magic Natsume had released had started to fade now. Yamashiro deflected it outward with a barrier as if mimicking Natsume's methods, fending off the Fire Realm magic.

Yamashiro smiled knowingly.

"Well, that's pretty good for a student who withdrew in her second year. With that kind of skill, you could even get qualifications as a professional Onmyouji. ......But I'm not sure whether the subject of forbidden magic would work at the Onmyou Agency."

Yamashiro shrugged his shoulders with a leisurely smile as he said this.

Natsume ground her teeth as she lay collapsed on the ground, her black hair scattered over her face. The Fire Realm magic from before had already used all of Natsume's power. But Natsume couldn't 'see' any traces of disturbance in Yamashiro's aura after resisting it. It was as if he hadn't even gotten serious. Even though he was young, his position as a Divine General wasn't unwarranted.

"In any case, you're a kouhai, so I don't plan on treating you roughly. Behave yourself and sit still."

Yamashiro spoke haughtily to Natsume as he stuck his hands into his pants pockets. His expression carried the cold, penetrating gaze unique to professional Mystical Investigators.

However, when Yamashiro walked towards Natsume, he suddenly stopped and showed an abnormal expression.

Akino sprinted in front of the immobile Natsume. The tengu shikigami was together with her.

"Wha!?" Natsume was completely speechless.

Natsume had focused her mind on Yamashiro since the magic battle had started, and she had believed that the tengu shikigami had acted to bring Akino back to the monastery. Right now, Akino was spreading her arms and confronting Yamashiro without even hiding her rabbit ears solely to protect Natsume.

"Akino, no!"

"T-Tengu-san! Please help me release Hokuto's bindings."

"Why did you come back?"

"Isn't that obvious? We're friends!"

Natsume could only grit her teeth tightly and glare resentfully at Tengu at Akino's words. It obeyed the orders of people in the temple, so in other words, perhaps it had already brought her back and then had been ordered by Akino to bring her

back to Natsume. Though she had thought it had consciousness, it seemed like it wasn't wise enough to read the situation yet.

On the other side, Yamashiro expressionlessly gazed at the interrupting youngster and shikigami.

"....."

He snorted emotionlessly, his hands still stuck in his pockets.

Then, the two Cat Bandages that had been scorched into lag by the Fire Realm magic closed in on Natsume from the left and right. They planned on binding Akino and Tengu as well.

Did she have no other choice but to use it? Natsume thought with a slightly bitter expression.

".....Akino. Please leave me."

"No!'

"In that case, please hide behind Tengu and crouch down on the ground."

"Eh?"

"Hurry!"

As Natsume's shout rang in Akino's ears, she instantly moved with a speed that left afterimages. It was a high speed that even made Natsume who had instructed her to do so doubt her own eyes. Even the expressionless Yamashiro berated himself for being careless.

After Akino returned behind the tengu shikigami, she carefully got down on the ground as Natsume had instructed.

Natsume raised her head from the ground after confirming all of this, looking at the two Cat Bandages.

Then,

"Hekireki. I'm counting on you!"

Instantly--

With a crashing explosion of sound, Natsume was covered in a blinding light. The Swallow Whip binding her body instantly turned to ash. Then, intense lag also appeared all over the tengu shikigami to her side. Akino who lay on the ground also wailed "Eek!?" from fright.

"What!?"

Yamashiro reflexively changed his stance as Natsume leaped up, released from her bindings. As she stood up, her body was laced with discharging sparks. Sparking electricity constantly coursed through the jacket she wore.

It was lightning.

"Could that be? Lightning magic!?"

Yamashiro moved his hands, instantly forming a seal. The instant he put up a barrier--

"Hah!"

Natsume swung out with her gloved right hand.

Flash.

Bright yellow lightning from Natsume's right hand left scorched traces between her and Yamashiro. Then, a thunderous rumble rang out. A jarring sound of impact came immediately afterwards. The lightning's might shoved the barrier and Yamashiro's feet slid backwards. Taking advantage of that opportunity, Natsume swung both her hands this time, and countless bolts of lightning instantly tore through the air. The Cat Bandages that had been on standby dropped down towards Natsume's head, but like the Swallow Whip, they were instantly turned to ash along with their shikigami charm.

"You didn't even use a charm - No!? A shikigami! A defensive shikigami!?"

Yamashiro shouted out the correct answer. This was a high-level manmade defensive shikigami of her original creation, Hekireki. It wasn't materialized, it was just a special shikigami that followed its master's instructions and released several preset magics. It hadn't originally been Natsume's shikigami. It was a defensive shikigami that had been specially lent to her from an extraordinary former exorcist - who was currently acting as Natsume's master[40]. It was one of Natsume's trump cards.

"Tengu! Please leave with Akino now!"

The smell of burned air spread. It was true that Hekireki was quite a powerful shikigami, but its abilities were extremely specialized and thus its scope was limited. In the first place, lightning magic was known to be quite difficult, and the difficulty of controlling Hekireki was evident. That was why controlling it was a difficult technique.

That said, lightning magic was different from most other magic. The outcome was visible the moment after usage, and it was a magic that activated in one fell swoop that was impossible to change or adjust. It was a magic that couldn't be properly grasped without proper resolve.

But right now wasn't the time to hesitate.

"Noumaku sanmanda botanan indoraya sowaka!"

She formed the seal of Taishakuten, the god of lightning, and chanted his mantra to strengthen her link of spiritual power with Hekireki. She poured her magical energy into Hekireki and attacked through the shikigami's magic.

Raging lightning assaulted Yamashiro.

"Tch!"

Yamashiro maintained the barrier while running to the open mountain ground. But the lightning magic attack would hit its target the instant it was case. 'Evading' it was impossible in the first place.

Yamashiro narrowed his eyes.

"I remember that there was something in Imperial Onmyoudou - Got it! Akada of the east! Shiyutakou of the west! Satsuteiro of the south! Sodamani of the north!"

He chanted the incantation of a 'lightning-repelling' magic of Imperial Onmyoudou. Though it was a bit rare, it was indeed a conventional method of dealing with lightning magic. But this wasn't a magic that sealed lighting magic. In the end, it was just an 'avoidance' magic.

But it was alright if Natsume couldn't hit. She constantly released lighting strikes without any reservations. Raging thunder flooded his hearing and made his skin vibrate. The flashes scorched his retinas and his sight turned white. It was alright if she couldn't hit him directly, it was enough to just barrage him.

Natsume checked Akino's current condition. The tengu shikigami had judged that being next to Natsume was very dangerous, so it had carried Akino back and put her low to the ground. If she just continued suppressing Yamashiro with all her power like this, she would be able to stop his pursuit. Then, she could escape by running into the mountain forest with Akino and Tengu. But,

"I really underestimated you, kouhai! I've changed my opinion of you, so I'll also start fighting for real."

Even while he was avoiding lightning strikes, they ought to have conveyed huge impacts to him just by striking randomly nearby.

However, the Mystical Investigator released his barrier. Several charms appeared in his hands. Shikigami charms.

Then, he infused the charms with magical energy--

Natsume inadvertently became fearful upon feeling a disgusting presence.

"Come! Evil spirits! Order!"

Yamashiro didn't throw out the magic charm. Rather, he gripped it tightly in his hand, and then dense black miasma poured from the gaps between his fingers. It formed irresolute blobs, and it seemed that a terrifying pulsation was born in that black fog. Though they were clouds, they seemed to have a viscosity like molten metal. Moreover, Natsume remembered the feeling of this miasma extremely clearly.

"Kodoku!? To think you're using forbidden magic."

Natsume had witnessed a Yakou fanatic Mystical Investigator controlling a kodoku before. But the kodoku at that time was undoubtedly different from the one Yamashiro controlled in terms of number or miasma quality.

The kodoku were brimming with anticipation. When she thought that, their surfaces suddenly split and giant eyeballs appeared in the black fog.

The eyeballs that were flickering back and forth all turned to focus on Natsume.

"Go."

The kodoku practically cried out as they rushed in Natsume's direction.

Goosebumps had risen all over Natsume's body, but she engaged the group of kodoku without a shred of cowardice. With a rumbling roar, she constructed a barrier of lightning. At the same time as it stopped the kodokus' advance, it began burning them from the outside. But,

.....This is bad. If this goes on.....!

Lightning magic was usually 'inactive' relatively often. It couldn't be continuously cast without quite some spiritual power. Though Hekireki's existence more or less compensated for that fault, it was quite an intense consumption. If she didn't hurry up and resolve things, Natsume's spiritual power would burn itself out.

"...Hmph. You're still too young."

Yamashiro smiled proudly, and Natsume suddenly realized.

One kodoku had circled around to Natsume's right side and was closing in. She hadn't expected him to case stealth magic on a kodoku. Natsume's right hand reflexively slashed out and electricity ran along the surface of her pants. Lightning released from her gloved fingers struck the kodoku.

But the power was too weak. The wriggling black fog was only half-blown away by the lightning. The remainder glided through the air as it approached Natsume.

She was going to get hit. When Natsume thought this, her body was suddenly lifted up from behind.

...Eh!?

Her body dangled in the air, pulled up by a powerful strength. It seemed like she was floating on the wind. When she came to her senses, she was already flying backwards. She desperately turned to look and saw the tengu shikigami behind her holding Akino with one hand and holding her by the collar.

"You?"

The tengu shikigami dropped lightly on the ground behind them, carrying Akino and Natsume.

"Hokuto!? A-Are you hurt!?"

"Akino....."

Yamashiro on the other side clicked his tongue magnificently. "Tch!" She had been saved with the best timing. Natsume thanked the tengu shikigami with extreme gratitude.

"H-Hokuto, you're incredible! So amazing. I didn't know you were so strong. You're really, really amazing."

Akino rambled on. Natsume had just been saved from a crisis, so all she could feel was helplessness.

Even so, Natsume inadvertently smiled wryly.

It was because Akino's rabbit ears looked so cute jumping back and forth.

".....Call me Natsume."

"Eh?"

"It wasn't a lie to call myself Hokuto, but that's what I was always called."

Akino was dazed for a while at the start, then nodded continuously.

"Natsume, you're really amazing."

"No, I'm not much. Also, it's not over."

Then, Natsume turned her gaze in Yamashiro's direction.

Yamashiro looked at the tengu shikigami as if sizing up the new fighting power. Then, he regrouped the group of kodoku, preparing to find the opportunity to attack again.

Natsume adjusted her stance after breathing deeply again. She ignited her fighting spirit again and focused her consciousness on Hekireki.

"On saraba tatagyata hannamanna nou kyaromi!"

The seductive - yet biting cold - female voice sounded in the minds of everyone present.

Part 2

"Oh my....."

Miyoshi raised his head and murmured in surprise as he sat on a wicker chair reading a book in the lounge of his living quarters.

"It seems like it ended up turning into a magic battle."

A storm's coming, Miyoshi said to himself in a muttering tone. Yuge was meditating next to him, or perhaps it could be said that she had been asked to wait at his side for the whole time.

Her eyes widened with an "eh" and she turned her face towards Miyoshi.

"Yamashiro?"

"Yeah. It looks like he was unable to request assistance with gentle means. Well, that was anticipated."

Miyoshi showed a look of seeing far in the distance. Then, Yuge asked seriously.

"Is the opponent really Tsuchimikado Natsume?"

"Though I can't say for sure, it's ninety percent certain."

The forbidden magic that Tsuchimikado Harutora used was the 'soul' magic that was especially taboo among forbidden magic - the Taizan Fukun Ritual.

And the person he had used the Taizan Fukun Ritual to resurrect was a girl also from the Tsuchimikado family - Tsuchimikado Natsume.

Because of the Onmyou Agency higher-ups - or to be direct, Chief Kurahashi's influence - that matter was still strictly controlled information even one year afterwards. That said, the tables had already turned. The Kurahashi family had originally been a branch family of the Tsuchimikado family. He had probably decided that it wasn't such a good thing for the main family's secrets to be exposed.

In any case, Tsuchimikado Natsume was a key individual if they wanted to contact Tsuchimikado Harutora, that was for sure.

"Should we go over too?"

"If Yamashiro-shi's there, it's already enough."

"But."

"First, even if we hurry over now, it'll just make chaos."

"I see."

"Also, if you go, who's going to protect me."

"......Haahh."

Yuge was more or less used to Miyoshi's always-calm tone when he spoke. Actually, Yamashiro was a National First-Class Onmyouji Mystical Investigator, a professional at magic against humans. As a Special Senser, Miyoshi didn't matter as much. The Mystical Investigator Yamashiro and the exorcist Yuge, who was used to spiritual disasters as opponents. Obviously, the former was more competent in this type of magic battle.

Never mind Tsuchimikado Harutora with his two powerful shikigami for now. There was no reason that he would be unable to capture Tsuchimikado Natsume with just her as his opponent.

"Also, we also have our own visitors."

"Eh?"

The moment Yuge replied this, she also noticed the movements nearby. She immediately put up a barrier inside the room.

But,

"Yuge-shi, the barrier only needs to cover you and me. They won't be able to come in if you seal even the room."

"......Is that alright?"

"The people there won't take any actions to provoke the Onmyou Agency."

Come to think of it, the visitors were from the reformist faction. Yuge adjusted the range of the barrier and limited it around her and Miyoshi.

Afterwards, people of the monastery entered the quarters and rushed into the lounge with pattering feet.

Yuge slowly stood up from her chair.

There were eight in total.

Though they were dressed in various colors, they all carried powerful aura. Perhaps they were all ajari. It was Rian who entered first, his eyes glinting in his pale face. As they had anticipated, he led the primary members of the Seishuku Temple reformist faction.

Rian spoke to the sitting Miyoshi.

"Excuse me, Miyoshi-san. Could I ask where Mystical Investigator Yamashiro is?"

"He just left."

"Where did he go?"

"He should be by the edge of the monastery right now. He has some business to attend to."

"Damn, at this kind of time!"

The silent Yuge rapidly stepped forward towards the cursing Rian. Just that movement made the ajari tense up.

"Could I ask what your business is? Don't you think it's a bit absurd to barge in with so many people in these circumstances?"

"If that's what we're talking about, your declaration earlier was far more absurd. To think you would accept Tsuchimikado Harutora whom the Onmyou Agency designated as wanted. What exactly are you intending by doing such a thing?"

"I don't remember saying anything about acceptance. In light of your situation, the three of us said that we would acquiesce to your methods. But if the dark temple truly accepts him, the Onmyou Agency won't dare to look down on Seishuku Temple any longer. You can probably imagine what kind of countermeasures the Onmyou Agency will take."

"......Yuge-shi, you don't need to bring up your own speculation."

"Yes, my apologies."

Yuge admitted her fault quite readily. That said, anyone could see that they were just acting. The latter half of her declaration had been a suggestion as well as a warning. Those words were better said from the position of an individual. Yuge herself had considered various means of dealing with Seishuku Temple.

But Rian turned back to look at his comrades behind him after hearing Yuge's words, not even seeming to let Miyoshi's exhortation of "Did you hear clearly?" enter his ears.

"As expected, the Onmyou Agency won't ignore the problem of Tsuchimikado Harutora. Seishuku Temple's fate will be chosen today. We can't let Jougen do what he wants even for the future of Seishuku Temple."

The ajari roared loudly as if to reply to Rian's rousing words.

Yuge put on an expression of incomprehension, but Miyoshi silently sat there watching Rian.

"Priest Rian, could I ask what you plan to do?"

"Miyoshi-san. ...No, 'Divine Eye' Miyoshi Tougo. Also, 'Binding Princess' Yuge Mari. Please lend us your strength. We will resist Jougen's tyranny and help you arrest Tsuchimikado Harutora."

"Oh my, that's quite troublesome."

Miyoshi replied straightforwardly, putting on a troubled appearance.

"I think we said in the courtyard that we would cooperate with your actions."

"I realize your true feelings from hearing Yuge-san's words from before. You originally said you would follow the monastery's policies, so you should try to listen to our opinions as well, right? The monastery isn't all composed of stubborn ajari like Jougen. All of the ajari standing here agreed to your proposal."

"How unfortunate. The three of us only recognize Priest Jougen as the representative of Seishuku Temple. Though we're talking with you right now, you might not realize that in the end, we need to focus our negotiations on Priest Jougen."

Miyoshi's tone couldn't be called polite no matter what. That said, his tone wouldn't change towards Jougen either. He didn't particularly intend on belittling Priest Rian. Though he thought this, the face that Rian looked at Miyoshi with was pale and filled with humiliation and anger.

But right afterwards, Priest Rian swallowed his anger and turned it into a gloomy smile.

"I see, perhaps the current circumstances are indeed like that. Jougen is the actual monarch of Seishuku Temple. But that will change in the future."

Rian took out an envelope from inside his clothing as he said this. Yuge reflexively infused the barrier with spiritual power to strengthen it. However, Rian was unmoved, taking out a sheet of paper that seemed like stationery from the envelope and then passing the stationery to Miyoshi with a flickering gaze.

"You'll be able to understand just by looking at this message that I've already made contact with Chief Kurahashi Genji of the Onmyou Agency. He's already answered me, saying that I will be in charge of the temple after Seishuku Temple merges with the Onmyou Agency."

Rian spoke overbearingly, a confident look of from-behind victory on his face.

Yuge inadvertently looked at Miyoshi's face. Miyoshi breathed helplessly out of his nostrils, and finally stood up from his chair.

He silently took the stationery and spread it open, looking at the contents and then raising an eyebrow. After Yuge glanced slightly at the contents, her face became hard out of shock.

"Officer. This is."

"I can say that it probably wasn't direct from the source. It was through some sort of intermediary." Miyoshi responded to Yuge's suspicion.

"What?" Then, Rian asked with a cloudy expression.

"What are you trying to say? Are you saying that we can't trust the veracity of this message?"

"That's right, just like you say. You can't trust it."

"What nonsense! Properly look at the end of the message, it has the Chief's own signature."

"That... Alright, why don't you let your comrades standing behind you confirm the latter portion."

Saying this, Miyoshi spread the message he had taken in front of them.

After Rian glanced briefly at the message, his lips twisted as if mocking Miyoshi's farce. But the expression of the ajari behind him changed drastically when they saw the contents.

"W-What! Hey, Rian. What's going on?"

"What exactly do you want to do? Don't joke around during this kind of time. Where's the real message?"

"W-What?"

The pale-faced ajari restlessly questioned Rian. Rian frowned, putting on a surprised expression of incomprehension.

His gaze returned to the contents of the message.

"Is there something strange about this message? It came directly from the Onmyou Agency chief."

After she looked at him double-checking the contents of the message with a serious face, the bespectacled woman who had stood next to Rian yesterday spoke in a slightly shaking voice.

"Rian, can't you 'see' it?"

"...He probably can't.[41] As expected, this message was just a pure catalyst. The illusion magic was only cast on Priest Rian himself."

Miyoshi asserted this and then folded the piece of paper - or rather, the 'magical pattern covered by marks of ink' - back to its original state, giving it to the bespectacled woman. She accepted the message and then immediately opened it up among her companions, checking it again. Then came the angry shouts and moans of the ajari. Rian finally understood the situation after witnessing his comrades' reactions.

"Illusion magic? How? T-That Mystical Investigator Yamashiro definitely told me that letter came from Chief Kurahashi yesterday."

"Yeah. Then as expected, it was Yamashiro-shi's mischief. I see, you secretly met with him."

Miyoshi spoke while taking on an indifferent demeanor. Perhaps he already understood the entire situation to a significant degree. Yuge suppressed her inner displeasure. Though it had been part of his mission, she couldn't get used to those kinds of tricky 'politics' regardless.

"Mischief?" Rian muttered as if he had lost his soul from across him.

"T-Then what about the negotiations we had before?"

"You mean the ones before the three of us came here? Well, although Yamashiro-shi's a Mystical Investigator, it was probably a pure concoction that the commander of the Mystical Investigators Chief Kurahashi was contacting you in the first place. Perhaps it was even an 'informal' agreement."

"T-Then what about the treatment we were guaranteed before!?"

"Alright, what we said about Onmyou Agency's conditions yesterday are true - at least at this point. As for your individual treatment, I haven't received any information from the Onmyou Agency."

Rian froze motionlessly upon being informed this in Miyoshi's cold, businesslike tone. Some ajari shook in anger, some sighed, some froze out of surprise at the outcome, and some were speechless.

The ajari were all outstanding practitioners. Yuge didn't dare be careless. But they didn't seem prone to an outburst at all.

It was fortunate that they could get over this peacefully. But on the other hand, she also understood that they couldn't oppose that Jougen no matter how many people of this level they gathered. Though she didn't know what devilish ideas Yamashiro had. They were probably involved in his plot.

The moment she sank into thought.

"...Yuge-shi."

Yuge's hands formed Ucchusma's seal faster than Miyoshi's notification.

"On shurishuri mamarimari shushuri sowaka."

With no regard for the panicked stances of the ajari, she chanted a mantra and strengthened the barrier in a flash.

Then, at the same time,

"Are you satisfied, Rian?"

A voice sounded. The ajari looked around. Apparently, the lounge of the quarters were connected to the hall at the entrance by a sliding door. Right now, this sliding door and the door to the entrance were opened and a robed monk wearing a kasaya stood outside. He was Jougen.

The ajari immediately seethed with killing intent, but turned back as if they had been chased into a corner rather than taking stances to 'oppose' him like Rian spoke of. Jougen was equanimous towards the young ajaris' killing intent.

"......Jougen." Rian's face twisted as he called out.

But Jougen warned him calmly.

"Please be aware. The Onmyou Agency is a nest of demons where many crafty practitioners are gathered. They're not opponents that you fledgling novices can compare to."

"S-So what. It's better than having the Onmyou Agency as an enemy. Your methods will end up leading Seishuku Temple to ruin."

"It's as you say. That is why I need Tsuchimikado Harutora-dono."

"W-What?"

Rian and the ajari were all stunned. Even Yuge doubted her own ears, and Miyoshi showed a surprised look as the barrier protected him.

But Jougen formed a binding seal in place of a reply, his wide sleeves slowly swaying.

"Noumaku sanmanda bazaradan sendamakaroshada sowataya untarata kanman..."

He chanted Acala's... salvation magic. Magical energy instantly burst out from his body with no warning. The refined magical energy swelled up in a flash. The heat wave it brought with it pressed back on the room. At that point, the ajari hadn't completed their magics in time.

"Huh!? This guy."

Jougen, who was chanting the mantra, wasn't rushed, nor did he have any intention of speeding up.

"Order."

The ajari approaching the entrance released magic in unison since they were being taken lightly. But the attack was ineffective.

The magical energy dispersed around Jougen as he used his magic itself formed a tough barrier that blocked the attacks.

Jougen, his eyes half-closed, watched the ajari like that, calmly switching hand seals.

From a sword seal to a blade seal. A Dharmacakra seal. A divine salvation seal. Following that order, he slowly chanted a mantra.

"...On kiriun kyakuun..."

Spiritual binding, or the so-called Unmoving Golden Chains magic. The Unmoving Golden Chains commonly used in General Onmyoudou had taken in the features of the Shugendo system of magic and increased its usability. But what Jougen used was a Vajrayana prayer.

Rian and the others, who realized that their attacks were ineffective, continued to form seals with pale faces. They put up barriers to resist the magic.

Then, the Unmoving Golden Chains bound them and the barrier together and tightened around them.

"Urgh!?"

They were immobilized like that, still in their postures of making various seals and completely unable to move. It was as if the air had solidified. Whether their limbs, or their skin, organs or bones, their entire bodies were all bound mercilessly and tightly. The only thing that endured Jougen's power was the Ucchusma barrier that Yuge put up.

"Jougen, you--" Rian gritted his teeth and said.

But not even now did Jougen change his expression. He just switched to another seal without pausing, as if carrying out some sequence as part of repetition training. He repeated a magic of Acala again.

"Noumaku sanmanda bazaradan sendamakaroshada sowataya untarata kanman."

The prayer was complete. In the end, even the consciousness of the young ajari was bound and they fell one by one. Though Rian desperately struggled against Jougen until the very end, the victor had undoubtedly been decided when his movements had been sealed. After crying out hatefully, he fell onto the ground like his other comrades.

A clean sweep. As ajari, their powers were no less than professional Onmyouji. But Jougen had easily toppled them single-handedly with an overwhelming strength. Miyoshi could definitely judge that Jougen was extremely strong.

"..."

Yuge's expression tensed. But Jougen released his seal after rendering all of the ajari unconscious, lowering his hands.

Jougen spoke in a cold, indifferent tone:

"本寺无方，汗颜之至，皆系拙僧无德，于此告罪了." [42]

"H-How do you plan on treating these people?"

"It won't be much. They'll continue to train, as they're all people who haven't completed their training. Also, even without these people, the 'strength' of this monastery won't change."

With half-closed eyes, Jougen arrogantly eyed the ajari collapsed on the floor. That expression felt more emotionless than stern. A chill ran through Yuge's back.

"Quite a wonderful technique." Miyoshi said straightforwardly.

"Nothing but a lowly trick."

"You're too modest. Just the fact that they became ajari is enough to prove that they're quite capable. Especially that Priest Rian, isn't he quite powerful? But they're useless in the eyes of Priest Jougen. Truly quite remarkable."

"This monk is undeserving of your praise."

"Still speaking politely--"

"This monk's power is unremarkable. Sir, you should know of the true monster who left this mountain."

Yuge was taken aback by Jougen's words. She understood who the monster he spoke of was.

"This monk has a question. May I ask you to enlighten me, sir?"

"Feel free, Priest."

"Why is the envoy assigned to Seishuku Temple not 'Enma' Miyachi?"

"If you really want to know," Miyoshi concealed his own expression, and then continued to speak boldly.

"Quite unexpectedly, we were worried that he would feel 'homesick'."

"O-Officer."

Yuge warned Miyoshi in a voice close to a groan. Even so, Miyoshi still looked at Jougen undauntedly, waiting for his response.

Jougen smiled bitterly for a moment.

"It would be joyous if he truly had those feelings."

That sentence was the reply that Jougen made to Miyoshi's provocative-seeming statement. Then, Miyoshi continued speaking with a sharp voice.

"Could you clarify for me what you meant by what you said before?"

"What was that?"

"Please don't feign ignorance. What exactly does the sentence 'that is why I need Tsuchimikado Harutora' mean? Is it true that you suddenly received notice that he was coming to the mountain?"

"I shall be honest with you, it was indeed this monk who 'invited' him. But I did not think that you would meet with 'him' by chance."

Yuge was stunned by Jougen's speaking in a clear tone. This was something that they couldn't ignore after hearing no matter what.

"So Seishuku Temple plans on joining hands with Tsuchimikado Harutora."

"....."

Jougen didn't reply directly to Yuge's question. Miyoshi and Jougen's emotionless, artificial gazes crossed in midair.

Just then, thunder sounded in the distance.

Miyoshi and Jougen averted their gazes at the same time, turning in the direction of the thunder.

"Thunder? .....No."

Jougen murmured quietly to himself, as if focusing his attention on clearly listening. On the other hand, Miyoshi gazed into space with a serious look.

Yuge felt confused at the reactions of the two, but she immediately understood what was strange. The thunder didn't stop.

The thunder continued, but almost never broke off. It was indeed cloudy right now, but they weren't thunderclouds. This kind of sudden, continuous thunder was quite strange.

But Yuge had once encountered a 'similar' situation to this.

".....Magic?"

After Yuge murmured that word, she thought of the magic battle that was going on right this moment. The magic battle between Yamashiro and Tsuchimikado Natsume. Right, that situation from before had involved a 'Tsuchimikado' as well.

"O-Officer, could it be that Tsuchimikado Natsume--!"

"....."

Miyoshi didn't respond, pulling his concentration from the faraway thunder back to Jougen who stood in the entrance of the quarters.

Jougen was the same, leisurely yet carefully watching the situation play out.

Then--

'That voice' resounded in unison inside the minds of the three of them.

Part 3

Tadanori noticed the sound of thunder from afar right after he had walked out of the temple.

He reflexively looked up at the sky. Though the sky was filled with clouds, they weren't at the level where they could make that kind of thunder. Or were thunderclouds floating towards them from somewhere? How inauspicious..... But maybe that was a weather befitting the current Seishuku Temple.

Though he didn't look the role, Tadanori had been an exorcist during his youth. Due to his young arrogance, he had clashed with his boss over conflicting opinions and had retired from his Onmyou Agency job. Though he was confident that his ability wasn't poor, he had underestimated how tough it was to be a practitioner trying to stick to the path of magic in this world. His vagrant life had continued ad infinitum, and before he noticed it he had joined the Seishuku Temple. It had already been ten years since then. He continuously lived through every dull day, and only realized that time had slipped by when he looked back.

He couldn't assert that he had never regretted the life choices he had made in the past. He could calmly accept his current circumstances. Tadanori honestly admitted this, which probably meant that he had settled down.

He quite enjoyed his calm life at the monastery. He had long since stopped pursuing thoughts of change by now, not to mention thoughts of returning to the Onmyou Agency. Hence, Tadanori, who was basically maintaining a moderate position, approved of Jougen's thoughts this time. Though he had definite suspicions about Jougen's assertions, Tadanori held reverence for the monumental Jougen as a lower-leveled practitioner.

But on the other hand, he could vaguely feel it. The Onmyou Agency's influence was constantly spreading alongside the reform of Onmyou law. That was an unstoppable passage of time that Jougen couldn't resist with his way of life and policy towards the monastery.

After the Divine Generals had visited from their workplace yesterday, news that the Onmyouji rumored to be Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation was visiting had arrived today. He had the premonition that it was some kind of fateful revelation. Maybe that was proof that he had converted to Buddhism - though perhaps just on the surface.

He had entrusted himself to the seasonal cycle[43] and lived unchanging days.

But it had probably reached a time when he could no longer continue maintaining that kind of life.

Tadanori indifferently looked up at the sky and sighed, dropping his gaze to his feet.

Then - the start of 'change' began at that appropriate moment.

"On saraba tatagyata hannamanna nou kyaromi!"

The voice resounded directly in his brain.

It was a woman's voice, with an almost seductive charm. But the tone she used gave him a feeling of piercing clarity, like a cold flowing brook, and penetrated the listener's thoughts.

The voice chanted an ordinary mantra. An esoteric mantra that was recited during prayer and training. Also, it was the incantation chanted here at the Shingon Seishuku Temple when the North Star King visited.....

Tadanori almost unconsciously cast his gaze to a corner of the corridor - the shikyakumon[44] connected to the stairs stretching to the Mountain Gate.

The tall cedar trees stretched endlessly into the distance, creeping all the way to the foot of the mountain. The ancient gabled shikyakumon stood in the middle of this backdrop.

Also--

A small darkness appeared as if cutting through space on the dim side of the mountain forest.

It passed through the standing cedar trees, flying over the top of the shikyakumon and silently reaching the courtyard.

A small darkness.

It was a raven.

But something was wrong. Tadanori finally realized as he unconsciously followed it with his gaze. This raven had three legs. Before he was able to

consider this, his instincts that realized a step earlier sent a chill run through his entire body. The three-legged raven passed over Tadanori's head, silently flapping its wings. It flew towards the main hall in the interior of the courtyard, and then.

Tap.

The raven beat its wings powerfully, scattering dancing particles of light and black feathers as it landed in front of the main hall.

Tadanori inadvertently blinked. The raven beat its wings and landed - just as he thought that, the raven that ought to have landed transformed into a boy wrapped in a black coat.

The person that the raven became seemed to be unconcerned about the shocked Tadanori and climbed the stairs of the main hall.

He first put his hands together before he entered. He bowed deeply.

"--On sojirishuta sowaka."[45]

He chanted the mantra of the Myouken Buddha, the principal deity of the main hall. He didn't look humble - rather, the way he chanted felt strangely friendly. That simple sincerity made the dumbstruck Tadanori more or less return to normal.

The person wrapped in the black coat finished chanting the mantra and bowed again.

Then, that person turned his back to the main hall.

He was a boy.

But he had an inexplicable air to him - no, it was more accurately described as broad-mindedness. He could feel an extraordinary breadth of mind to him. His unornamented posture made one feel a broad tolerance unbefitting his age.

The black outer coat covering the boy was a black reflective color, seemingly woven from a large amount of raven feathers. Tadanori knew its name. 'Raven's Wing'. Then the name of this boy went without saying.

Tsuchimikado Harutora.

No, that was wrong - Tadanori understood the truth extremely naturally.

He didn't possess a powerful aura, nor was he awe-inspiring. It wasn't a sense of greatness or his ability as a practitioner. There was an even more inexplicable but extremely convincing factor, practically an instinctive sense, that directly touched the soul.

That person - that great man was Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Then, the boy noticed the gaze directed towards him and looked at Tadanori.

But only his right eye looked over.

The boy's left eye was covered with an eyepatch. An exquisite brocade slanted vertically to cover his left eye.

"Priest!"

The boy called out.

Tadanori looked left and right. Only after confirming that there was no third person here did he finally point to himself.

"Yes!"

The boy nodded.

"Is there someone named Jougen here? I'd like you to bring him a message. Tell him Tsuchimikado has already arrived."

His words were clear. Ahh. He couldn't help but think that Yakou was this kind of person.

Suddenly, without any trigger at all, he recalled his memories at the Onmyou Agency ten years ago. He had some kouhai who were feverishly inclined towards Yakou back then. Makihara and Mutobe. Also, a kouhai named Eto - if he hadn't remembered incorrectly - who was always with the two of them. He recalled the earnest descriptions of Tsuchimikado Yakou that they had weaved.

The founder of Onmyoudou, the ancestor of Japanese magic, a young great Onmyouji. A genius who had been called the reincarnation of Abe no Seimei, one of his ancestors. Even though he was a senior, they had fervently explained exactly how unmatchable his greatness was, their eyes flashing with light.

That great person was currently speaking to him. Tadanori could only stand in a stupor, feeling like he was daydreaming.

"......Hmm? Uh..... You're an ajari here, right? I thought I sent a message, did it not make it here?"

The boy scratched his head, puzzled at the speechless and stunned Tadanori. Even so, Tadanori couldn't break through the countless sad feelings rattling around intensely inside him.

The one before him was the symbol of change that he feared and avoided.

More importantly, the 'foundation' of the world that he currently lived in had been established by this man.

He was just a shameful practitioner who had nowhere to go in the society outside and who had ended up setting foot in the dark temple. To think that all of a sudden, that historical figure who had been born from an ancient bloodline of magic was speaking to him with a casual attitude.

He couldn't even imagine that such a thing was happening.

Just then, people of the monastery continuously appeared from the temples and the gathering hall behind the main hall, clustering in the courtyard. Everyone focused on the boy stopped in front of the main hall, stunned and dumbstruck. The boy clearly became more and more troubled at the gradually increasing audience - though he was completely fearless - and a bitter smile appeared on his face as if to say, 'Well, what do I do now?'

Just then,

"I've made you wait."

A deep voice sounded and entered their ears.

At that moment, even that voice had trouble hiding its excitement. Tadanori turned his head to the master of the voice - Jougen. He seemed to have come

from the direction of the living quarters. His monk's clothes were in a rare state of disarray as he ran to the courtyard.

After seeing Jougen, the boy revealed a cheerful smile.

"Tsuchimikado-dono, it is nice to meet you. This monk is named Jougen."

At the same time as he introduced himself, Jougen nimbly neatened his appearance. The boy returned a "Nice to meet you".

In contrast to when he had spoken to Tadanori, the boy's expression had changed a bit. He still kept his straightforward, familiar attitude, but a leisurely, unrestrained tinge had mixed into his smile. As if he had met a good opponent in a game, the heroic young man revealed a childish and unconcealed fearlessness from his heart.

The boy asked.

"Priest Jougen, can I view that 'summons' as belonging to you?"

"Indeed. Even though it was tested by time, the ancient agreement should be enacted accurately. This monk is honored that you have come so far for a mere nobody. .....No, on this occasion, allow me to welcome your 'return'."

Saying this, Jougen straightened his back, his priest's clothing swaying elegantly as he lowered his head.

"North Star Mountain Master[46], Tsuchimikado Yakou-dono."

Jougen's words impacted the people gathered in the courtyard. Tadanori was no exception, as he inadvertently let out an "Eh?".

The boy sighed and spoke, showing a 'this is really troublesome' expression.

"Priest. My name right now is 'Tsuchimikado Harutora'."

Jougen smiled slightly, raising his head.

"Then - Harutora-dono. As one of the ajari entrusted with watching over this place, allow me to extend my most sincere welcome to your return."

Yuge's movements were a step slower than Jougen's, obviously all because of Miyoshi.

"Yuge-shi! The chant just now was obviously the announcement of Tsuchimikado Harutora's arrival to the mountain. If you run out without a plan, what will you do if you get dragged into a magic battle!? I won't tell you to do anything else, but please be cautious and move carefully."

Hence, Yuge could only leave Jougen alone as he rushed to the courtyard. She first cast a tough barrier to protect herself and Miyoshi, and then cast stealth magic on top of that, and finally headed to the courtyard after the ajari's trail. Also, she didn't go directly, but rather circled around to the gathering hall behind the main hall, looping to the courtyard from the other direction.

The two of them reached the courtyard right when Jougen was bowing his head. Yuge hid behind the trunk of a cedar tree when she heard the ajari say 'North Star Mountain Master Tsuchimikado Yakou' and rapidly turned her gaze to the main hall.

A black-clothed boy silently stood in the middle of the monastery.

He was the one-eyed boy that she had seen in the wanted pictures of the Mystical Investigators. He himself straightforwardly gave out the name that he was wanted by.

"Priest. My name right now is 'Tsuchimikado Harutora'."

"Then - Harutora-dono. As one of the ajari entrusted with watching over this place, allow me to extend my most sincere welcome to your return."

That was Tsuchimikado Harutora.

The feeling of tension coursed through Yuge's body. Then the black coat he wore on him was probably Yakou's magical tool, the 'Raven's Wing' that had triggered a commotion at the Onmyou Agency last year. No, rather than that, where were his defensive shikigami? Where were the Hishamaru and Kakugyouki that served Yakou? Had they not materialized? He ought to have no reason not to bring them. Even as feelings of tension clawed at her, Yuge did her best to think for herself.

But.

...Return?

At the start, she thought she had misheard. But she wasn't the only one surprised. The audience gathered in the courtyard in the middle of the monastery were similarly stunned at Jougen's words.

He remembered that the so-called 'Master' meant the person in charge of the sect. In other words, the Master Jougen spoke of was the sect leader of the Shingon Seishuku Temple.

"Yakou was the leader of the dark temple?"

"......It's my first time hearing that kind of thing too. But that's strange....."

Though Miyoshi pondered this, only pure curiosity could be felt in his words, unlike Yuge's.

He was so talkative at a time when they clearly couldn't guarantee their own safety. It was truly a critical situation, but he felt so leisurely. Could this be viewed as confidence in Yuge's power?

Similarly, the people who felt troubled by the name of Master naturally included Harutora himself.

"Priest Jougen, I'm naturally very happy to be welcomed, but I don't remember becoming the Master, you know? I was indeed thanked for looking after Seishuku Temple, and though people joked and said 'why don't you be the Master'..."

"This monk heard it from the last words of the dying Priest Shinra."

"That person..... Doing whatever he wants on his own again."

"More importantly, Harutora-dono responded to the message of this monk. Seven days ago, this monk lit the homa[47] during the dead of night. Though it took some time, you appeared in this temple like Priest Shinra said. This can be seen as your committing to the agreement of becoming this monastery's Master."

"Well, even if there were arrangements, there are actually a lot of things to consider."

The boy - Harutora - looked troubled.

Upon calm observation, it was a truly inexplicable scene. A conversation between a still young and rather casual boy and a quite stern, about fifty-year-old monk. However, the one being polite was the latter. The former never acted impolitely, and rather, his methods of interaction felt extremely natural. These two were indeed 'communicating with each other'. Perhaps it was due to common information that only the two of them knew.

Tsuchimikado Harutora.

At the same time as he was the former student raised by the branch family, Tsuchimikado Harutora, he was also the great Onmyouji who had revived magic during the war, Tsuchimikado Yakou. The conversation between the two made that 'truth' gradually feel real to the third party Yuge.

"Harutora-dono."

Jougen called out to Harutora - and also Yakou.

"I have no other reasons for inviting you here. I know of your activities, and it is the truth that you are undoubtedly Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation - and therefore the Master of this monastery as well. At the same time, in light of the current situation of the magic community, this monk believes that right now is a suitable time to call you back as the Master of this monastery."

".....Truly quite incredible. Then what do you mean by 'suitable time to call me back'?"

"Harutora-dono, this monk need not explain the machinations of the Onmyou Agency. Allow me to speak freely. This monastery is on thin ice. If this goes on, the history of Seishuku Temple that has been handed down for hundreds of years will meet its end within several years."

"....."

Jougen asserted without changing his expression. Harutora didn't say anything. But the people of the monastery clamored loudly as they watched this. They clearly couldn't conceal how shaken they were by Jougen's direct words.

Jougen continued speaking, unconcerned about their shakiness.

"The Onmyou Agency has their own plans. This monk does not know what they are based on. We are separated from the world. We occasionally accept 'work', but we only hope for the opportunity to exercise our skills, and we are merely a ring of training practitioners. But the Onmyou Agency is threatening us with that, not letting us be - but that is all trivia on the 'surface'. Both sides have no reason to resent the other, much less reason for hatred."

But - Jougen continued speaking.

With a flat yet somewhat crazed tone.

"If the Onmyou Agency wishes to interfere with this monastery, that is unacceptable and cannot be permitted. How can we become meat on their chopping block? Indeed, this monastery might be the poison of the magic community. But poison can become medicine sometimes. In the first place, magic is both yin and yang. Abandoning either one side is absurd. If we sit and do nothing, those actions will bring about the disruption of yin and yang!"

Jougen spoke powerful words. Those words held lofty self-confidence. Like an enlightened monk expounding the essence of the world.

Yuge showed a sour expression as if she had eaten a lemon. Miyoshi muttered to himself from behind her back: "It looks like we're quite reviled."

"I cannot deny that the Onmyou Agency is extremely powerful. This monastery cannot oppose it. As for our options..... you are the only route this monastery can still take, Harutora-dono. Outside of having you as our Master to lead us in confronting the Onmyou Agency, there is no alternative."

"....."

"In addition, this isn't purely for the benefit of this monastery. Right now, you are crossing blades with the Onmyou Agency alone. Although this humble monk is ignorant of your reasons, this monastery will provide significant assistance in your contending with the Onmyou Agency. Please join hands with us and become the poison, the yin. Then, as this poison, this yin, we will right the Onmyou Agency's foolishness for becoming purely yang and extend the prosperity of the entire magic community. Harutora-dono. Please, you must accept the position as this monastery's Master!"

Strength swelled in Jougen's old body as he straightforwardly made his request. Even after his words were spoken, the clear sound still reverberated in the mountain.

...To think he was this ridiculous..... Tch.

She had imagined this during his dispute with Rian earlier, but as expected, Jougen was truly preparing to oppose the Onmyou Agency. That definitely wouldn't be overturned as long as he was still the actual decision-maker of Seishuku Temple.

Yuge immediately thought of it. If perhaps Tsuchimikado Harutora truly joined hands with Seishuku Temple, then what level of threat would they pose to the Onmyou Agency?

But, faster than she could reach a conclusion:

"Sorry, I must refuse."

Harutora replied calmly and quickly.

Jougen's expression was unmoved, as perhaps he had anticipated this. But unstable fluctuations palpably appeared in the swelling strength filling his body.

"......Would you inform this monk of your reasons?"

"I didn't plan on that in the first place. Also, sorry, but if I wanted fighting power against the Onmyou Agency, Seishuku Temple is unable to become my strength. I'm trying to lay as low as possible right now, you know? The moment I come out of hiding, that's equivalent to making my move. Though I don't know what you expect of me..... I'm not as omnipotent as you imagine."

Harutora shrugged as he said this.

His words and actions weren't arrogant, nor was he self-abasing. In contrast, his natural, always-casual attitude made Yuge somewhat fearful and anxious as she stood in the position of his enemy.

Even so, Harutora still spoke with a familiar, natural attitude.

"Actually, I responded to your 'summons' because I have some business at Seishuku Temple. I plan on leaving soon after I finish that business - though I must apologize to the people of the monastery."

"......May I ask what that is?"

"Yeah. ......Well - although I don't know what he's called now, is there someone called Sen here?"

Jougen showed displeasure for the first time upon hearing Harutora's question.

"......Sen is still around. But that person is just a servant. He's not someone you need to be concerned about."

The words he replied with were laced with anger. Harutora laughed brightly.

"I see. It seems like you really are Shinra's disciple..... 'Don't ignore Sen-san's teachings, listen carefully to them' ...Did Shinra not say those things to you? That person's different from you, he had quite a high evaluation of Sen."

".....I do remember your words. Though Priest Shinra was an outstanding man, he was a person who had various faults."

"Haha, I guess. I can't deny it when you put it like that."

Harutora laughed, seeming quite amused. He confronted that Jougen with a hard-to-believe carelessness.

"But whatever. It's enough that he's still alive. I'll go look for him. Come to think of it, the Seishuku Temple area is pretty nostalgic."

Harutora crossed his arms as he said this, surveying the courtyard.

".....Really, it was well-preserved."

Deep emotions unbefitting his age could be clearly seen on the face of the boy as he muttered to himself. At that point, Yuge clearly felt the old soul existing in the boy's body.

He was - Tsuchimikado Harutora.

He was - Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Jougen endured Harutora's reply with a grim face. For an undetectable instant, he forcefully clenched his fist.

".....Negotiations have broken down. Please consider it carefully. I would feel ashamed if I caused you trouble."

"Don't worry..... Also, our goals were completely different from the start, and I don't really have any particular obligation to go along with what you advocate."

Harutora smiled. It was a fearless smile unlike his smile from before.

A despairing smile surfaced on Jougen's face at this. The space between the two tensed up instantly. Clearly understanding this, the onlookers immediately held their breath.

"Harutora-dono."

"What?"

"I'm extremely sorry, but please allow this humble monk to hold you back."

"Didn't I say? I refuse."

"This monastery has no means of continuing on outside of you."

Jougen asserted. Harutora scratched his head, troubled.

Then--

"...That's enough, stop right there. You who are called Jougen, back off!"

Without warning, a shikigami materialized on the steps of the main hall, in front of Harutora. Yuge - along with the people of the monastery watching this - were all taken aback and their bodies inadvertently shivered.

It was a woman.

Moreover, an extremely beautiful one.

Noble and dignified like a young female soldier yet seductive and alluring at the same time. Those completely opposite qualities melded together to the greatest extent. Sharp, keen blue eyes. An otherworldly beautiful woman whose body was covered by a military outfit, but one who gave off a flirtatious charm that contrasted with it.

But there were abnormalities in her human form. A pair of animalistic ears grew on her head. Also, a soft, leaf-shaped tail swayed behind her.

A living spirit[48]. And in the form of a 'fox spirit'.

"In the end, my lord has no obligation to answer your plea, especially when there is no benefit for him. If you stubbornly attempt to harm my lord, I will show no mercy even if you are related to the monastery."

The woman announced sternly and coldly.

Then.

"......Well, I guess it's getting troublesome. Harutora. Is that enough?"

Another shikigami appeared behind and to the side of Harutora.

This time, it was man.

His body was huge. He was almost as tall as the eaves of the main hall. Though he had a sturdy, muscular body to complement his height, the appearance of the suit he wore gave off an intelligent impression. His short golden hair made one think of a crown. His chiseled features revealed a tough smile as he looked extremely joyfully at Jougen.

The man's muscular flesh vanished without a trace in the left sleeve of the man's suit, and the empty sleeve swayed freely with the wind. In addition, negative miasma poured from the man's body - demonic aura. He was named the 'one-armed oni', a being who had lived and wandered through the world since ancient times.

"The situation is generally the same as what I anticipated. Well, things concluded faster than I imagined."

The man spoke in a somewhat brusque voice.

Yuge held her breath, watching these two shikigami.

A beautiful fox spirit and a one-armed oni. The left and right hands that supported Yakou, Hishamaru and Kakugyouki. Their overpowering presences made one feel that Harutora, who had seemed distinctive within this situation in the first place, was completely out of place. The moment the two shikigami

appeared, it could be felt that their master Harutora's 'presence' rose greatly in the blink of an eye. It wasn't a mistake. There was no other ordinary practitioner who could even match up to the feat of leading these two defensive shikigami. At that point, Miyoshi suddenly reproached her with a swift "Yuge-shi". What was it? When she thought that--

Yuge met Kakugyouki's gaze.

"So? What are you planning, Onmyou Agency? Though we are enemies of enemies..... Should we enjoy the battle, since it's a rare opportunity?"

...No!?

A disaster. Her stealth had already been seen through the moment she thought this.

She had been overly focused on 'observing' the two shikigami, leading to a disturbance of her stealth magic. What a low-level mistake. No, maybe she had been spotted even earlier. Anyway, although her stealth magic had been broken, her barrier was still maintaining functionality. Yuge showed herself from behind the cedar tree, her face flushed from unease.

Jougen was unmoved, as he had probably anticipated that they would be hiding somewhere. But the other people of the monastery, including Harutora, all shot glances at Yuge simultaneously.

A split-second later, Miyoshi jumped out after Yuge.

"We have no knowledge of this matter, and we're completely unrelated. We're absolutely not your enemies."

He proclaimed loudly and resolutely. But he shrank behind Yuge's back as if trying to hide himself. Though she was already used to such things, what was this shameful feeling as a fellow Divine General?

Harutora looked unperturbed by the Divine General's unbecoming demeanor.

"I'm extremely thankful - but that's also very strange. In fact, I'm designated as wanted right now. .....Well, I get it for now. Please stay to the side for now and don't come over to impede us."

He grinned indifferently as he spoke to Yuge and Miyoshi.

Quite a happy smile. He was being entertained by these circumstances right now.

"How regrettable."

Jougen spoke.

"In that case, I have no other choice. Also - Harutora-dono, you're looking down on this monk too much."

The barrier Yuge put up suddenly vanished.

"...What!?"

Yuge was shocked and Miyoshi stunned. Hishamaru and Kakugyouki's eyes also widened slightly as lag flowed across their bodies.

If Jougen had chanted a mantra, or maybe had seemed like he was trying to form a seal, Hishamaru would not have hesitated to stop him beforehand no matter what kind of magic he used.

But Jougen had done nothing at all.

The ones who had activated that magic were the ajari supporting Jougen who had been watching the developments from afar and who had received Jougen's secret signal of 'How regrettable'.

Magic centered on the main hall spread explosively into the surroundings.

A barrier. But it wasn't any simple ordinary barrier. It was a barrier that completely cut off the functioning of magical energy inside the body. Acala's arts had barrier protection methods, and this barrier was similar - more accurately, it ought to be named an 'array'[49].

Even though it was similar, the scale of the magic was worlds different. Normally, the object of a barrier protection method was a single practitioner. The person using that magic would cut himself off from the effects of some sort of magical spiritual power - that was a barrier protection method. But the current array had been laid down beforehand. Its scale was at the level where it sealed the entire mountain.

When the barrier that spread from the main hall touched the barrier that simultaneously spread from the foot of the mountain, they merged together and laid down a huge array. Yuge recalled the Mountain Gate that they had passed to as they came to Seishuku Temple.

If she recalled correctly, a barrier had originally been set up from that Mountain Gate that circled around from the monastery to even deeper up the mountain. This magic had strengthened the original barrier - more accurately, it had instantly changed it into a different magic. That said, the effective range of this array was the entire monastery of Seishuku Temple. It was actually impossible to cover a greater range using this magic.

Yuge was an expert on barriers. That was why she understood even more profoundly the huge scale and difficulty of this giant array that used the previous barrier.

This array was called the 'Stealer of Divinity' and could render all practitioners powerless. It most likely needed various conditions to be met - the distribution of aura, an environment of magical energy cultivated over a long time, deposited power from the spirit flow, an ideal spirit flow when it was activated, and so on. Currently, it had activated for the first time after all of those conditions had been perfectly fulfilled, that was for sure. More importantly, a suitable magic had to be prepared along with the countless conditions. Just imagining it a little made her feel dizzy. The only thing she knew for certain was that this might be something like a 'heavenly feat'.

Hishamaru looked up, clicking her tongue in displeasure. The ears on her head twitched from restlessness. Kakugyouki whistled with an appearance of admiration. Lag was occurring throughout the bodies of the two shikigami.

Though it was surprising that they were still able to stay materialized, powerful shikigami of their level were also affected by the barrier--

"...How is it?"

Jougen smiled arrogantly.

"Harutora-dono. No, Yakou-dono. This is the barrier that you laid at this monastery before. Even so, I added some modifications. Even you cannot release the magic right now."

Harutora just made an "nn" sound to Jougen's words, smiling wryly back.

"Well, it would be too hard to release the magic right away. But what do you plan on doing after this? Aren't you troubled as well by being unable to use magic?"

"......You are a powerful practitioner. But as the Master of this monastery - this 'dark temple', you must view your accumulated experience of using magic in a broader setting."

Suddenly, Jougen raised his right hand. With that signal, robed ajari charged in.

They were all equipped with guns. Among them, there were even people toting automatic weapons. A worthy image of modern soldier monks[50].

"This monastery has various kinds of 'work'. We use various weapons to achieve our goal, not limited to 'first-class magic'. In general, magic is one of these. Even so, I do not intend to use firearms inside this monastery. Please give up on resistance."

The number of ajari was roughly forty or fifty. It looked like non-'disciples' were included among them. By the looks of it, more than half of the monastery's members had chosen to follow Jougen. Without exception, all of their muzzles were pointed at Harutora.

"You..... scoundrels!"

Hishamaru's eyebrows slanted downwards and she shouted powerfully without regard for the lag all over her body. But even she couldn't completely defend against this number of guns while being magically sealed. Needless to say, it couldn't be done even with Kakugyouki who also waited behind. Even if she could keep herself safe, she would be unable to protect her master Harutora.

Yakou's reincarnation Harutora and the two defensive shikigami that supported him. This barrier array was the trump card Seishuku Temple used to oppose them.

"Harutora-dono. Please give up and surrender."

The front of the hall was already completely surrounded by soldier monks. Yuge, who stayed standing to the side, felt an inauspicious cold sweat form on her back.

...This was..... bad.

What they had done just now completely announced their opposition of the Onmyou Agency. After capturing Harutora and the others, Jougen definitely wouldn't just allow Yuge's group to return. Perhaps they would also be captured.

Yuge looked askew at Miyoshi. Even that man was currently furrowing his brows in displeasure. But he was unable to think of any countermeasures and could only continue staying silent.

".....Really."

Harutora complained lightly, surrounded by muzzles.

"You just put on such airs and talked so much, but isn't what you're doing now the same as a Yakuza?"

".....This monk will happily accept whatever blame you have after this."

"No, I don't want to blame you for anything. More importantly, I also agree with the point of 'viewing accumulated experience of using magic in a broader setting'. So, as thanks, let me show you 'my methods' this time."

Saying this, Harutora took something out extremely smoothly and naturally.

His totally natural motion made the gun-toting ajari tightly surrounding him unable to react. Jougen, who was the only one able to move, stared at the thing in Harutora's hands with a tense face - it wasn't a charm or a magical tool.

It was a cell phone.

"......That's right. To be honest, this is a military method."

Harutora's lips curled into an ice-cold smile. Suddenly, a giant black shadow crossed over the clouded courtyard.

Yuge suddenly looked up, her eyes widening. A flock of birds were flying to the courtyard, their numbers immeasurable. Dozens of birds packed together and flew together as a flock.

These flapping birds were seagulls. Moreover, they were blue. They were shikigami - the transportation-type shikigami manufactured by the Witchcraft Corporation, 'T2 Seagull Flyers'.

However, what attracted Yuge's attention wasn't the group of 'T2 Seagull Flyers' itself, but rather the cables that were strung from each of the seagulls, along with the giant hunk of metal hung below, supported by the strength of groups of dozens of seagulls.

"Wha--"

The people in the courtyard slowly looked up at the sky and were shocked speechless one by one. The people right underneath the shadows fled in a panic.

Then, when they hauled their object and arrived at the center of the courtyard, the seagulls released the cables together.

The hunk of metal dropped.

The barrier array that Jougen and the others had put up fully covered the vast interior of Seishuku Temple. Of course, that included the space above. The hunk

of metal dropped from above onto the hemispherical barrier and touched it. Waves of lag flitted over the barrier's surface - and the hunk of metal passed through, colliding heavily with the ground.

The ground shook, the tremors and impact passing through the entire monastery. Including Jougen, Yuge, and Miyoshi, everyone stared dumbstruck at the hunk of metal that had dropped from midair.

Harutora calmly issued an order amidst the shock that had still not dissipated.

"Magic release. Tsuchigumo, activate."

The 'incantation' that didn't contain any magical energy was no mantra, nor was it a prayer.

But the moment those words left his mouth, the magic that had survived half a century inside the hunk of metal since the Second World War finally awoke.

It was impossible to use magic inside the array that cut off magical energy. But the giant array that Jougen had put up couldn't stop the magical patterns that had been physically carved inside the hunk of metal from activating. Moreover, it was armored with new anti-magic barriers. The completely new barriers put up inside it blocked the effects of the array put up inside the monastery, ensuring that the magical energy inside the armor circulated without any disruption.

The hunk of metal moved - as if it couldn't wait.

Eight long, folded legs made sharp metallic sounds as they spread out radially. The long legs tread on the ground, supporting the main body.

An abnormal shape showed itself.

A spider.

A giant spider made of metal. From its head up, it had an upper body resembling samurai armor. On its forehead covered by a conical samurai helmet was a pentagram mark giving off a faint golden light.

Yuge gasped.

"Those are 'Armored Juggernauts'!"[51]

In the past, Tsuchimikado Yakou had accepted the request of the old Japanese military and completely recreated magic, leading to the revived Onmyoudou.

His representative military invention during wartime was this 'Armored Juggernaut'.

Also.

"......It's not just one."

Miyoshi said quietly to himself. He nodded at Yuge, who turned around with an "Eh?"

"I can 'see' spirit even when my magical energy is cut off. There's one on the north foothills now. There's also one Armored Juggernauts that's activated already on the south side - at the base of the mountain where the mountain path is. It's going to move soon to tear open the barrier in the monastery.

The barrier array Jougen had prepared didn't just include the main hall, it covered the entire perimeter of the mountain. Namely, the 'base' of the barrier was also placed at the foothills. Right now, that base was being completely destroyed by the Armored Juggernauts.

"...Impossible."

Jougen's voice shook.

In response.

"Very good."

Harutora smiled, the Raven's Wing fluttering on his body.

He spoke to the two defensive shikigami waiting for their master's instructions.

"Begin."

Chapter 5 - Cursed Temple on Fire

Part 1

The stern yet alluring voice of a mature woman. The instant that mantra sounded in her mind, Akino's breathing momentarily stopped and her ears stood straight up.

In addition to Akino, shocked expressions even surfaced on Natsume and the Mystical Investigator named Yamashiro with that sudden voice.

But unlike the purely shocked Akino, the two seemed to already know who exactly the master of the voice was.

"That voice just now!"

"Damn, he's already here!?"

They turned their gazes towards the mountaintop as they shouted.

Then, Akino realized who exactly the master of the voice just now was from the reactions of the two of them.

...Tsuchimikado Harutora had come! Natsume's childhood friend was here!

Huh, but the voice just now had been a female voice. Could it be that Tsuchimikado Harutora was a woman? Or maybe he had ascended the mountain with a woman. No matter which possibility it was, Tsuchimikado Harutora was already at Seishuku Temple, that was for sure.

...Natsume.....!?

Fretfulness that she had never before showed was on Natsume's face. Fretfulness - along with anxiety, anticipation, and even a little bit of dread were mixed together into an extremely complex expression.

"You've started getting a bit panicked. But since my target's already arrived, I don't have the time. I'll quickly finish you right away."

Yamashiro declared coldly, controlling the group of eye-catching black kodoku.

"......That's my line."

Flashing electricity crackled as it flowed over Natsume's entire body. Yamashiro snorted, unleashing the kodoku again.

Natsume fearlessly stood in front of Akino, facing the approaching group of kodoku. Lightning filled her vision with a crash and Akino desperately held back from crying out.

Akino felt like she had entered another world in this vortex of intense vibrations and rumbling that she was experiencing for the first time in her life. Lightning struck next to her again and again. The ears on her head were also flattened as her legs trembled, unable to move. Even checking the surrounding situation was very difficult.

She didn't even have room to step into that kind of intense magic battle. All she could do was back up as much as possible to make sure she didn't obstruct Natsume from moving back.

So at least,

"T-Tengu-san! Please help Natsume!"

Even though her request was so irrational, Akino still shouted. She shouted while moving as far from Natsume and Yamashiro as she could, running away from the terrifying thunder.

Then, she fell down.

...Ah, honestly!

How slow did she have to be? But she didn't have time to sigh about it. She adjusted her crooked glasses, breaking into a run again.

But the next moment, a mysterious loss of energy passed over Akino. Akino staggered and almost fell down again, hastily stopping herself.

...Eh? What was that?

At the same time as she suddenly noticed something was wrong, Akino realized that the rumbling thunder had also vanished.

"Natsume!?'

She hastily turned around and spotted Natsume there down on one knee. Akino was frozen with terror for a moment. It wasn't just the electricity that had vanished, as even the group of kodoku Yamashiro controlled had also disappeared. Then, Yamashiro looked up, cursing fiercely, "Damn!"

"What's up with that barrier!? A magical array? Did Jougen do this?"

Yamashiro was angry. Then, Akino also noticed that even her rabbit ears had vanished.

Though she didn't really understand, it appeared that all magic-related things had suddenly been rendered ineffective. It was probably related to Tsuchimikado Harutora arriving at the mountain. The reason that Natsume was kneeling was definitely related to magic becoming ineffective. She was a living spirit like Akino.

But Natsume's situation was even more severe than Akino, who just felt a loss of energy. Her face was pale and her body couldn't move. Right now, she was practically collapsed on the ground.

...Could it be!

It wasn't just because she was a living spirit, it was probably also related to how she had already died and been resurrected. In that case, wouldn't Natsume fall into quite a dangerous state when magic was sealed?

"Tch! I guess I have to!" On the other hand, Yamashiro, who had lost his kodoku and whose magic had been sealed, fished something out of his clothes with a grim expression.

It was a pistol. Akino's expression changed.

"I won't kill you. But don't blame me if you still try to resist and I shoot your leg. In any case, you have no chance of victory if magic is sealed. Give up!"

Yamashiro approached Natsume without any regard for her reply. Natsume slumped on the ground on one knee, glaring at Yamashiro through her scattered black hair. Though an endless fighting spirit shot out of her eyes, her face was bloodless and her forehead was heavily sweating. Even though the gun-toting Mystical Investigator was already close by, Natsume didn't seem like she would be standing up anytime soon.

Natsume's condition was very dangerous. Akino reflexively rushed to Natsume's side. But someone was already standing between Natsume and Yamashiro, even faster than Akino.

The shikigami named Tengu.

Yamashiro stopped.

The tengu shikigami was also affected by the barrier. Lag was all over his body, and his figure had almost vanished already. Even so, the shikigami stood sluggishly between the two of them, facing Yamashiro face-to-face in order to stop him.

"Hey. Don't get in the way."

Yamashiro growled indifferently. The gun sounded and the lag on the shikigami's body became even more severe.

Of course, Akino shouted "Stop" with a paled face, but Yamashiro didn't pay attention at all. One shot, two shots[52]. Yamashiro continuously opened fire. He fired to make the shikigami's movements even slower to stop the shikigami while closing in on Natsume bit by bit.

Just then, the situation changed again.

Suddenly, the strange loss of energy inside Akino's body vanished.

The barrier rendering magic ineffective had been released. Natsume's eyes flashed as she staggered up. Yamashiro raised the gun in a panic, but the hand he gripped the gun with had been grabbed tightly by a hand as thick as a log extending from the shikigami next to him.

Yamashiro glared, immediately forming a blade seal with his left hand and slashing at the shikigami's arm. While the lag cleared away, Yamashiro rapidly withdrew his right hand and retreated. But the pistol dropped from his hand onto the ground.

The tengu shikigami stepped on Yamashiro's dropped pistol.

Then, Tengu crushed the pistol into scrap with a heavy impact.

"You!?"

Yamashiro began preparing with the charms he took out like magic after pulling away. But at that point, Natsume had already prepared for battle again. Electricity filled Natsume's body and she held many charms in her two hands to confront Yamashiro. Akino stopped and held her breath again. She felt that a magic battle would start again between these two people and the tengu shikigami in the middle.

But the tengu shikigami standing motionless between the two of them quietly said something inaudible.

Natsume and Yamashiro stopped moving at the same time. The shikigami straightened the back it had been hunching before, turning its gaze in the

direction of the foot of the mountain - the north side of the North Star Mountain. Akino swiftly followed its gaze. The sound of something moving came from within the dense, lush forest.

The sound of something very large moving.

Akino rematerialized the rabbit ears that had vanished because of the barrier. As Akino stuck her ears up, the presence she felt immediately became clear to her. The sound of bark rapidly splitting apart and branches cracking came to her. Also, a mechanical sound of metal rubbing together.

Then, the moment Akino thought of trying to see what was in the forest, a giant body of metal rushed into the battlefield, kicking aside the giant cedar trees.

That giant body of metal had the form of a spider. A strange spider - Tsuchigumo.

"That--!?"

"An Armored Juggernaut!? How! Why is it here?"

Natsume and Yamashiro exclaimed in shock. With that, the Tsuchigumo heading towards the mountaintop abruptly stopped.

On the Tsuchigumo's torso was the upper body of a samurai wearing ancient armor. The iron helmet that covered its face turned to Natsume and the others.

A hazy flame shimmered in the depths of the empty face inside the iron mask. The moment those empty eyes caught Natsume and the others, they seemed to turn flashing and radiant. The eight steel legs supporting its torso moved up and down intensely as if they felt happy at spotting their enemy.

Then, it charged straight towards Natsume and the others.

"What!?"

Yamashiro hastily retreated. Natsume and the tengu shikigami also fled from the linearly-charging Tsuchigumo in a panic.

Even though it looked quite massive from the outside, the Tsuchigumo's movements were extremely fast. The Tsuchigumo immediately adjusted its direction the moment its charge was dodged and charged straight ahead again. A momentum as if it were yelling 'chaaarge'. It was a strange-seeming body of metal, but why did it feel so terrifyingly powerful?

"Could it be..... Did Tsuchimikado Harutora bring this here!?"

Yamashiro dodged the second charge with all his might as he roared. Even if he could use magic, he still wasn't an opponent who could face the Tsuchigumo head-to-head. After all, the opponent was a spider as powerful as a tank. Though Akino didn't know exactly what kind of thing the 'Armored Juggernaut' was, she felt that it would be impossible for a pure human to win against it head-to-head.

The Tsuchigumo samurai charged towards Yamashiro while spitting silk from its mouth.

Its target was Natsume. Natsume crackled with lightning, incinerating the spider silk. But the lightning that attacked the Tsuchigumo's main body at the same time barely harmed the Tsuchigumo at all. The Tsuchigumo's movements were just slightly delayed by lag, and although it fully endured the blow, it was unharmed.

The Tsuchigumo freely swung its eight legs while charging and spitting spider silk around it, toying with Natsume and Yamashiro. The two of them managed to escape it since the Tsuchigumo was targeting both of them at once, but the Tsuchigumo showed no signs of slowing down at all. Before anyone knew it, the tengu shikigami had already moved away from the two of them, watching the freely-rampaging Tsuchigumo.

The Tsuchigumo rapidly stampeded back and forth with abandon. It wasn't like a machine at all, as its movements were filled with vigor. But it had quite the mass after all, and the surroundings shook constantly like an earthquake. Akino and the others barely managed to stay balanced.

But, "Eek!?"

The rampaging Tsuchigumo charged at the frozen Akino. More accurately, the position the Tsuchigumo turned through just happened to be where Akino was. Akino's ears shot up as if she had been pricked and prepared to escape in a panic.

Then, she fell down.

"Akino!?"

Frightened, Natsume immediately released a lightning strike. She probably wanted to hold back the Tsuchigumo. The lightning strike dropped straight on the Tsuchigumo's body. But never mind being harmed, the Tsuchigumo's speed didn't even drop. Its eight legs trampled the ground as it charged towards the fallen Akino.

Akino felt that she was going to die.

But the moment before it squashed Akino, the Tsuchigumo suddenly stopped moving.

Its giant body slid to the side because of the effects of inertia. Akino cradled her head as she lay on the ground, but fortunately, the Tsuchigumo raised its body above her and deliberately raised the legs that were about to touch Akino as it deftly dodged her and flew out. The Tsuchigumo finally managed to stop after it had completely passed over Akino.

Akino's ears stuck up as she lay on the ground and she looked around. Then, she raised her head and saw that the Tsuchigumo that had flown over her head had changed its direction and was peering at Akino. Akino met the samurai's gaze.

Her mind had become blank.

A hazy light slowly swayed inside the iron helmet that symbolized anger. She felt an illusion as if the samurai's look were conveying something like "Tch, a civilian". Just an ordinary complaint. The Tsuchigumo soon lost interest in Akino and took aim to charge at Yamashiro who was staring on in shock.

Akino blinked in surprise.

...I-It seems like it let me go just now!

While Akino was still spacing out on the ground,

"Akino! Are you hurt?"

Natsume ran over, speaking as she helped Akino up.

"N-Natsume? What, what's going on?"

"The Armored Juggernaut - one of the military shikigami that Yakou made."

"M-Military shikigami?"

"Yeah. Though I fought one once..... it feels completely different. .....As expected. Back then, it was definitely because the shikigami's master was different....."

The Tsuchigumo had probably let Akino go just now. It was a spider-shaped body of metal, but it felt particularly human. That was very likely because of its master.

Natsume held Akino's shoulders while looking at the mountain top with a grim expression. The direction of the temple. Akino felt certain when she saw Natsume's pure and resolute look. As expected, he was in the monastery. Natsume's childhood friend whom she had come to see.

Then, at that moment, a dazzling flame lit up on the mountaintop they gazed at. Also, a powerful magical energy spilled forth. The presence of a fierce battle that was enough to affect the foot of the mountain.

A magic battle was being fought there.

".....Akino. Sorry. I....."

"You're going?"

"Yeah."

Natsume turned her head, nodding while looking into Akino's eyes. The current Natsume felt as if she were even younger than herself to Akino, probably because of her undisguised attitude.

"I understand. I-I'll go too. Actually, I can carry Natsume there--"

"It's alright. I'll use my 'trump card'."

"Trump card?"

"Yeah. Akino, you don't need to force yourself."

Yamashiro evaded the Tsuchigumo's attacks on his own as the two of them talked to each other. Even Yamashiro didn't have it easy against the Tsuchigumo. The Tsuchigumo had also started becoming angered against the opponent who was more powerful than it had anticipated.

But right as Natsume stepped away from Akino and was about to advance, the Tsuchigumo immediately included Natsume as an attack target again. It spat spider silk at Yamashiro before it and took advantage of the opening left by his having to deal with the spider silk to charge towards Natsume again.

This time, Natsume didn't try to flee.

The ground shook as the Tsuchigumo rushed straight at her. Akino's ears trembled. Yamashiro clicked his tongue while taking up a charm, thinking that it would be troublesome if Natsume died. The tengu shikigami who observed from the side also took a stance as if it were right about to step out.

The distance between the girl and the Tsuchigumo shortened.

Even so, Natsume didn't retreat.

She brushed her black hair while calling out sternly.

"Come, Hokuto. ...First seal, purge!"

Right as the words left her mouth, an astonishing 'yin aura' poured from Natsume's entire body.

It didn't feel mixed at all. It was a noble, high-level yin water aura. That was what it had been called by some ancient practitioners.

In other words, it was 'draconic aura'.

Then, Natsume's spiritual power increased explosively. The aura that could be felt from Natsume's body was no longer the spiritual power of a 'human'. It was as if she were a mobile spiritual disaster. Akino realized instinctively. The small golden water dragon Natsume had let her see in the morning. This spiritual power housed in Natsume's body - composing a major portion of Natsume's body - was the spiritual power of that beautiful creature.

It wasn't a water dragon.

Rather, it was a true dragon.

Yamashiro, who was held up behind them, also stopped speechless upon seeing Natsume's seal being released. Even the furiously-charging Tsuchigumo was taken aback and its advance was thrown into disarray.

Natsume extended her right arm, raising it above her head, as if to grab the entire sky. The draconic aura in Natsume's body spread towards the sky alongside Natsume's raised right hand.

According to the 'Five Elements of Yin and Yang', a basic tenet of Onmyoudou, 'lightning aura' was composed of the wood element of the five elements. Moreover, it was water aura that generated wood aura.

Water generates wood in the Five Elements Mutual Generation.

In addition, what Natsume released was no simple water aura. Rather, it was the high-purity yin aura released by a true dragon - draconic aura. The lightning aura that the draconic aura generated was practically indistinguishable from the 'divine

roar' that the dragon god ruling the weather would release towards the ground while angry.[53]

The divine spiritual power that Natsume brought forth was condensed into magical energy.

Natsume loudly chanted an incantation.

"Thunder, fill the sky for nine days!"[54]

The greatest thunder god of Taoism, Lei Gong[55]. And the Cross of Thunder bearing Lei Gong's name.

Natsume chanted the magic while swinging her raised right hand straight at the Tsuchigumo.

Thunder engulfed the world.

The battlefield was completely split in two by the image of the high-temperature white streak of light. The golden lightning pierced through the Tsuchigumo, and dazzling, scalding, and terrifying arcs of electricity fiercely scattered from the Tsuchigumo.

She couldn't open her eyes at all. Akino covered her face with her hands, her rabbit ears jumping left and right in agitation. Her senses also became slow. Her senses were all paralyzed and she couldn't even keep her balance.

She didn't know how long it was after that, as if even her sense of time had vanished. Akino opened the eyelids that she had shut out of fright.

The Tsuchigumo had fallen.

Its body that was supported by the eight legs was emitting smoke and dropped on the ground. Even the ground around it was deeply indented as if it had been crushed.

Then, in front of the Tsuchigumo stood Natsume, her arm still swung down.

Faint remnants of electricity still crackled on Natsume's body. The draconic aura had already been released now, and swirled elegantly around its master. That appearance seemed as if she were a shaman who had summoned a lightning god into her own body.

Akino was dumbstruck.

But,

"Careful, the Armored Juggernaut can still move!"

Natsume didn't even turn around as she warned Akino. How was that possible? Right as Akino thought that, the Tsuchigumo moved with a clank.

She 'looked' over inside the samurai helmet - with no traces of weakness - and the fiery light that flashed in its eyes was still not extinguished. The unyielding fighting spirit and the sense of mission in those eyes slowly burned.

The Tsuchigumo's legs started moving with a clatter.

"Akino - I'll be there soon."

Natsume said that to Akino and rushed off towards the Tsuchigumo. Akino was tongue-tied. Natsume's actions were so swift and powerful, but they were also extremely spry.

Natsume ran like the wind.

The Tsuchigumo stood up again, its whole body shaking.

The samurai spat out spider silk. Natsume incinerated it with lightning. After that, she leaped up. She flew high through the sky - but the Tsuchigumo aimed at Natsume who was flying in midair and jumped up. Its sharp legs pierced upwards like spears.

...Natsume.....!?

They were almost about to hit Natsume.

But Natsume stepped in midair and barely avoided the Tsuchigumo's legs.

Natsume moved step by step in midair, rapidly moving back and forth. With every one of Natsume's steps, golden draconic aura diffused from beneath her feet.

The draconic aura beneath her feet stretched into a long tail in midair as Natsume flew over the lush mountains, rushing straight towards the mountaintop.

Akino was inadvertently fascinated as she stared at Natsume running in midair.

The Tsuchigumo shook its legs as it looked up, as if to say: "Although you're an enemy, that was beautifully done indeed." Then, it moved its body stiffly and began to pursue.

Akino came back to her senses.

Come to think of it, Yamashiro had disappeared at some point. Perhaps he had also gone to the temple. What about Tengu?

Akino looked here and there. The tengu shikigami was in the same place she had seen it before, standing there with the exact same posture as it watched Akino and the others.

It seemed that Tengu noticed Akino's gaze. The tengu shikigami nodded lightly, rushing towards Natsume in the direction the Tsuchigumo had left.

You come too, it was saying.

".....Yeah."

Akino nodded deeply and started running at full speed as vigor flowed into her whole body from her rabbit ears to her toes.

Part 2

The Armored Juggernauts that had dropped down in the courtyard immediately started to suppress the area. The freely-swinging eight legs drove off the surrounding people. The silver silk that the samurai spat accurately bound the armed soldier monks.

The ajari were knocked flying after being bound by the Tsuchigumo's thread, then immediately lost consciousness. It wasn't a simple unconsciousness. Rather, it was because the thread absorbed their spiritual power.

Of course, the soldier monks wouldn't just sit and do nothing, and some of them also counterattacked with their automatic weapons. But the rifle bullets were easily deflected off the armor of the Armored Juggernauts.

The Armored Juggernaut was a mechanical shikigami whose metal body was its vessel. Firearms on the level of rifles couldn't even make it lag in the first place. In contrast, the Tsuchigumo fired the cannons installed on either side of its body as if to say 'Not bad, let me return the favor'.

The rumbling sound of cannon fire from the Pacific War era, different from the sound of modern firearms, resounded through the mountain. Smoke curled up from the barrels.

Stone lanterns were shattered, huge trees toppled, and large holes opened up in the monastery. The cannons bombarded the shikyakumon[56] like full-power chainsaws. Though it looked like their accuracy wasn't so good, their effectiveness as a deterrence was the real deal. The soldier monks who had surrounded Harutora before fled everywhere like scattering spiders.

"Well, to be honest, things like military vehicles are exceptional fighting powers."

Harutora murmured to himself with a bitter smile. Even with more than twenty military monks as its opponents, the strength of a single Armored Juggernaut was overwhelming. And though the soldier monks were all armed with firearms, they weren't used to using them and cooperating for a group battle. Judging from the

way Jougen commanded them, he hadn't commanded an armed group before. And needless to say, infantry like this were useless against military vehicles.

Before anyone noticed, the two Divine Generals who had announced their uninvolvement beforehand had disappeared somewhere. They were probably afraid of getting dragged in and hence had taken advantage of the chaos caused by the Armored Juggernauts to escape.

"D-Don't panic, just draw back!"

"No, aim! Aim at the shikigami's master!"

It seemed that several high-ranking ajari were shouting angrily. Avoiding the shikigami and attacking the master was a fundamental of magic battle when confronting powerful shikigami. But the excellence of the Tsuchigumo wasn't just in their offense. The Tsuchigumo nimbly used their legs and bodies to block bullets, deflecting all of the shots aimed at Harutora. Then, the people who had aimed at Harutora along with their commanders were immediately dealt with by the loyal defensive shikigami--

"Scoundrel!"

After they were subjected to a fierce counterattack, they went silent. The barrier based on the Mountain Gate would be destroyed soon and flaws had appeared in the array covering the interior of the monastery. Though the main hall's barrier still stayed up, a small defect would have huge consequences since the magic it was constructed with was extremely unstable. Right now, the lag had already subsided from Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

Then, as Hishamaru danced marvelously through the battlefield, Kakugyouki entered the depths of the main hall, destroying the final barrier. The array had already vanished completely when he came out.

The soldier monks were still putting up resistance, but not long afterwards they saw the second Armored Juggernaut advancing while constantly knocking down the cedar trees to the left and right of the mountain path in front of it. This was

the Armored Juggernaut that had just activated by the south side of the mountain and destroyed the barrier at the Mountain Gate.

The monks moaned in despair upon facing the new powerful shikigami. The second Armored Juggernaut's eight legs clanked as it moved and climbed up the mountain path, gazing at the soldier monks. Then, it easily passed through the shikyakumon that had already become cannon fodder. It walked in front of the first Armored Juggernaut as if saying 'Requesting regroup', neatly and respectfully arranging its eight legs. In comparison, the first Armored Juggernaut stamped back respectfully as if to say 'Good work'.

With the two gathered in the courtyard along with the one attacking on the north side of the mountain, the three Armored Juggernauts were all objects that had been stolen from the Onmyou Agency storehouses. Originally, vessels of the level of Armored Juggernauts ought to have been sealed in the Onmyou Agency building's sealed storage room. But unfortunately, the Armored Juggernauts' vessels were too huge, and it was difficult to keep them inside the agency building. Hence, the Armored Juggernauts had been kept in a storehouse administered by the Onmyou Agency under the name of research materials.

Of course, magical security had been cast on the storehouse. Especially after the incident with the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, that security had become even more serious. Even so, it was quite easy to break into the storehouse compared to the agency building's sealed storage room. Harutora and the others had used stealth magic to infiltrate the storehouse and cleverly stolen the Armored Juggernauts.

"They were originally things I made, so it's more accurate to say that I'm 'taking them back'."

To Harutora who casually said that, Hishamaru replied:

"These things must be very happy right now as well."

"Those things are armaments, not you."

Kakugyouki rebutted.

Also, Harutora had cast some misleading precautions on the simple shikigami guards and workers so that the Armored Juggernauts wouldn't be realized as stolen for a while afterwards. Actually, Harutora and the others had spent the seven days between receiving Jougen's message of 'summons' to arriving at Seishuku Temple on stealing the Armored Juggernauts along with handling and maintenance.

Harutora's reasons for especially utilizing the Armored Juggernauts wasn't because he had anticipated Jougen's next move. Rather, he had prepared them as effective measures to suppress a forested mountain battlefield in case the summons to Seishuku Temple was a trap. In the end, it was just coincidence that they had become an effective countermeasure to oppose this magical-energy-sealing array. But even if he hadn't prepared the Armored Juggernauts, Harutora had other means of destroying the magical array.

Hishamaru returned to Harutora's side, leaving the suppression of the courtyard to the two Armored Juggernauts. Harutora briefly checked the appearance of his defensive shikigami.

"Are you fine?"

"Of course, Harutora-sama."

Hishamaru waved her fox tail, replying pompously.

Kakugyouki shrugged his shoulders at the two, showing a fed-up expression.

"What Harutora wants to hear about is the condition of your 'stability'. It's normally in a pretty bad condition, and the magical array just now could only have impacted it negatively. Why don't you just obediently stay on the sidelines?"

"How foolish. Defensive shikigami are supposed to always stay by their masters. How can I alone stay uninvolved?"

The fox spirit frowned and rejected the one-armed oni's proposal. But Harutora also looked troubled.

"But what Kakugyouki says is reasonable. Hishamaru, you don't need to force yourself that much."

"What! H-Harutora-sama, even you're saying such things? Harutora-sama, are you saying you no longer need Hishamaru!?"

"I never said that kind of thing at all."

"T-Then please don't say such heartless things. My current condition definitely isn't as severe as Kakugyouki says. It's my natural responsibility to move alongside you as a defensive shikigami."

Hishamaru desperately spoke to Harutora with a despairing expression. Tears welled up in her clear blue eyes and the ears on her head and her elegant fox tail trembled pitifully. To be honest, it had been fine when she had her child form, but Harutora was pretty troubled every time he saw her do this kind of thing with her stifling beauty now that she had an otherworldly gorgeous appearance. He smiled bitterly, just replying to Hishamaru with an "I understand". Actually, he felt more at ease letting her follow him by his side than forcefully ordering her to leave and ending up with her secretly trailing him.

Then, Harutora's gaze returned to the battlefield before him again. He wished he could have avoided letting the Armored Juggernauts loose in this old haunt if at all possible. Unfortunately, things had turned into this. The passage of time was truly cruel.

Harutora wore a complex expression as his eyes reflected a scene from the same place but a different time. Then, there was a nostalgic figure from that scene.

"I'm very sorry, Shinra."

Harutora muttered with a lonesome expression.

But it might be too early to say that. The changes to the battle situation brought by the vanishing array weren't just beneficial to Harutora and his two defensive shikigami. Seishuku Temple wouldn't yield that easily.

"Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

Acala's Fire Realm magic swirled in the courtyard. Harutora and Hishamaru took up stances against this powerful magical energy. Kakugyouki smiled lightly as he

marveled. The Fire Realm magic in the courtyard spun into a giant tornado of flame. Sparks scattered in every direction like dust along with the fierce gale.

The power it carried was presently more than the limited-use cannons of the Armored Juggernauts. The tornado of flame swelled more and more into a giant vortex. The two mechanical shikigami were forced to stop in a panic. They were protected by magical armor, so they weren't seriously harmed even after being engulfed by the Fire Realm magic, but unlike bullets, they couldn't do anything to stop the Fire Realm magic. Then, the Fire Realm magic that engulfed the Armored Juggernauts rushed towards the main hall.

The Raven's Wing Harutora wore powerfully flapped its hem, bringing its master into the air. The two defensive shikigami continuously avoided the heatwave, moving to the roof of the main hall. But the Fire Realm magic didn't stop wildly extending in pursuit towards the black-clothed shikigami.

"Don't think too much of yourself!"

Hishamaru's magical energy rose from her body. It formed a pale blue flame - foxfire - and rushed straight towards the approaching Fire Realm magic. They engulfed each other, riding their momentums. The crimson and pale blue flames constantly intertwined, the gorgeously-colored flame dancing nonstop.

However, just then,

"...Harutora, Hishamaru, careful of below."

Kakugyouki 'saw' under his feet and simultaneously leaped up. Harutora and Hishamaru instantly turned to evade, the black coat and the fox tail fluttering in the wind.

Immediately, a raging aura spouted forth, shooting through the roof of the main hall from below. The aura that burst out like a volcano headed towards Harutora with the momentum of its eruption. Probably because the spiritual power was too violent, it wasn't even controlled by an organized magic spell. They probably wouldn't get off unharmed if they were drawn into this torrential, avalanching magical energy.

The intense eruption definitely wasn't a simple magic.

"They opened up a gap in the spirit flow."

Harutora spoke helplessly. The three of them leaped into the air to evade. The Fire Realm magic and the torrent of magical energy that approached them from below constantly tossed the three of them around like leaves in the air. Harutora's hair and the Raven's Wing swished loudly as they were swept by the strong wind.

However, at the same time as a powerful wind swept over Harutora's body, he narrowed his right eye and looked down. He spoke in a cold voice.

"...Hishamaru, you're in charge of the Fire Realm magic. Kakugyouki, I'm leaving the spirit flow to you."

"Understood."

"I can't completely suppress it, you know."

After they both replied, the two defensive shikigami flew out like meteors and landed again. Hishamaru was the first to act.

"Taniyata udakadaibana enkeienkei sowaka!"

She formed a dragon seal and chanted the mantra of Varuna, one of the Adityas[57]. Instantly, the defensive shikigami's magical energy turned into rain, the downpour battering the Fire Realm magic like a waterfall. The vapor that was produced from the collision swelled up like smoke. Hishamaru put up a barrier, unafraid of the scalding water vapor as she dropped towards it.

"Noumaku sanmanda bodanan barunaya sowaka!"

She continued chanting the mantra of the Aditya, and the waterfall pouring downwards became a whirlpool. She used the whirlpool to destroy the vortex of flame from the inside. The torrent overflowed out in all directions, and even the Armored Juggernaut left inside the Fire Realm magic were pushed away.

On the other hand, the way Kakugyouki dealt with things was quite simple.

"Anyway, I can get serious this time."

At the same time as he broke out in a fearless smile, the spirit flow erupted. Kakugyouki bared his teeth the moment his entire body was instantly violently struck by magical energy. His normally narrowed eyes widened with a grim light and his short golden hair sparkled as it extended into a messy mane. High-density demonic aura filled his body, and his normally almost two-meter-tall body grew once, twice. It swelled more and more as if it were normally suppressed.

Then. A pair of ominous horns grew from his forehead. After the magical energy touched the demonic aura entwined around Kakugyouki's body, it became demonic aura and started dissipating into the air behind him. Kakugyouki was immersed in the erupting magical energy, and the spilling magical energy flew out from the hole in the roof.

He revealed the smile of a wild beast that had caught its prey. He bared his teeth and roared, firmly clenching his right hand--

He smashed the erupting ground.

The resounding impact raised the ground around the spirit flow. At the same time, the main hall that it was centered on was blasted out explosively from the inside. The shockwave in the direction of the courtyard collided with Hishamaru's torrent and sent powerful splashes everywhere. After the powerful magics of the Fire Realm and the spirit flow were neutralized, Hishamaru calmly stayed in the courtyard and Kakugyouki stood on the foundation of the exploded main hall, leisurely stretching his body. Then,

"...高天原天つ祝词の太祝词を持ち加加む吞んでむ. 祓え给い清め给う..."

Harutora leisurely dropped down to the ground, spreading the wings of the Raven's Wing. After finishing the purification prayer, he clapped his hands at the same time as he landed. The magical-energy-carrying sound purified all the surrounding spiritual power. Then, Hishamaru returned to Harutora's side.

"Harutora-sama..."

"Yeah, I stabilized the spirit flow for now. Good work, Kakugyouki."

"It's too early for thanks."

Kakugyouki had already returned to his original appearance. He lightly stroked his chin, motioning towards the movement from the direction of the completely-destroyed main hall.

The interior of the main hall was raised from the ground towards the peak of the mountain. A patched-up gathering hall was erected there. In front of the gathering hall stood the ajari of Seishuku Temple side by side. The retreated soldier monks had gathered together again centered on Jougen.

Jougen's face was grim as he glared at Harutora. His lips were tight and his eyes burned with a vicious light as if he wanted to sear his opponent's soul.

Hishamaru immediately moved to eliminate the enemies with a cold look. But Harutora stopped her.

"Priest Jougen."

Harutora called out.

"Do you still want to continue?"

"Of course. This monastery absolutely will not surrender to an outside force."

"We don't plan on making you surrender or anything."

"The end result will be the same if we leave the Onmyou Agency alone."

"I never planned on leaving the Onmyou Agency alone in the first place."

"In that case."

Jougen gritted his teeth, speaking with an unbearable anger.

"Why do you refuse to save this monastery when you possess such strength!? Why do you abandon this monastery that has branded its mark into history since ancient times to the Onmyou Agency? Without this monastery, the feats that the ancients constantly undertook - the great magic techniques that have existed for so long - might end! Why do you, who touched the world with magic and allowed it to bloom, want to abandon this place? There are countless things that you ought to protect here!"

That cry that came from his soul enveloped fervent questions. Harutora calmly accepted the questions.

"It feels bad to be thought of as such, but Priest, it's too late to bring up such criticisms now."

Harutora replied in a bitingly cold voice.

"Priest, how many 'feats of the ancients' do you think I've crushed and how many 'long-lived techniques' do you think I've severed in the past for the nation? I'm the person who melted and recast the things that you always prized, forging them into things sharp as sabers. Things I ought to protect, you say? Have you gone senile from old age? I'm the madman who once muddied the nation's magic into chaos and then reorganized them with no misgivings, you know?"

Harutora's words weren't excited nor frenzied. Rather, they held a somewhat sad tune. But the current Harutora carried an abnormal feeling of pressure. He carried a deeper 'darkness' different from magical energy or spiritual power. Jougen's face paled in the blink of an eye.

"Priest, you made a mistake the moment you entrusted the continuity of the dark temple to me."

Jougen bit his lip hard at Harutora's lecturing tone. Then, his body shook and he shouted out, flipping the sleeves of his priest's clothing.

"Attack!"

At the same time as the soldier monks scattered, one group started chanting incantations like Fire Realm, curses, Unmoving Golden Chains. Some also threw charms.

"My, oh my."

Kakugyouki smiled slightly while severing all of the magics closing in with demonic aura in a flash. Hishamaru flew out from in front of Harutora, constantly releasing pale blue foxfire.

A magic battle started again in the blink of an eye.

Harutora didn't avoid the assaulting magics, as the Raven's Wing didn't let any magic attack get within half a step of him. Harutora calmly advanced, and the Armored Juggernauts that had been pushed into a corner of the courtyard moved again.

"Since you no longer care about the monastery, then I don't need to be polite anymore - Overwhelm."

The Armored Juggernauts that had been pushed away by the torrent seemed dizzy as if they had crashed into a giant tree, but once they received their master's order, their joints instantly creaked as they moved again. They stamped the ground with their eight legs as they advanced. When they were about to crash into the soldier monks, Harutora's grim and sad expression suddenly relaxed. He turned his gaze from the chaotic battle of the shikigami advancing through the group of soldier monks, turning his back to the battlefield and walking to a temple.

The temple, which faced the courtyard like the main hall, was already in a half-wrecked state after enduring the magic battle and the shockwaves of cannon fire. But Harutora didn't face the direction of its entrance, but rather the other side of the building. There was a person coming out who had been there to avoid the battlefield in the courtyard.

"Sen-san!"

"Hohoho, it's been a long time, Yakou-sama. No, I should call you Harutora-sama now."

The sound of explosions and shouts overlapped with chanted incantations from the other side of the courtyard. But the old man who had showed up didn't seem tense as he strolled leisurely.

But his wrinkled smile was even deeper now. His eyes that were still clear, albeit weathering many years, currently contained an indescribable gratitude.

"You're quite old. I really wouldn't know you if I couldn't clearly 'see'. But that's an obvious thing. How many years has it been?"

"Well, this old man forgot as well. I stopped counting at about ninety."

"'Old man'? Hahaha, the way you speak is suitable for an old fogey."

"As you say, I'm already called 'Old Man Sen' nowadays. But there's no helping it. It's been a long time. It really has been so long."

Sen laughed cheerfully, nostalgic emotions spilling forth from his chest. Harutora's remaining right eye moistened slightly.

"Although Harutora-sama is a different person, Yakou-sama's appearance remains there."

"It's the same bloodline, after all. Quite the resemblance, huh?"

"Honestly, it's quite nostalgic. That reckless habit of yours hasn't changed at all."

Sen's gaze turned to the courtyard as he said this. Right now, flame was dancing, water was pouring, wind was raging, and the ground was shaking there. An intense battle was cleanly destroying the past that the two of them shared. "How shameful." Harutora apologized bitterly. "It's alright, it's alright." Sen smiled.

"Rather than that, Harutora-sama, could it be that you came here especially for 'that'?"

As Sen said this, he brought Harutora around to the interior of the temple. The various things that were naturally placed on the ground here brightened Harutora's spirits.

"The tokijiku![58] As expected, it's already bearing fruit!"

What Harutora looked at was a seedling planted in a pot inside. The sapling in the pot was less than a meter tall. Its leaves had become small and round for the coming winter, and there were two small, orange fruit the size of a baby's fist dangling sparsely on it.

"Sen, did you help look after it?"

"Yeah, I didn't have anything else to do."

"A practitioner able to make this thing bear fruit. I never thought there truly would be one."

"You're too kind. Nurturing is very interesting, whether it's humans or other things."

Sen smiled, bending down to pick up the pot.

"I just watered them in Tachibana hall. As expected, it wasn't wrong to have brought them here."

He said this and then gave it to Harutora.

"Is this alright?"

"What are you saying at this point? Though, what do you want to use this thing for?"

"I'm still unsure now."

"Oh, unsure?"

Sen inquired incredulously, and Harutora smiled bitterly after accepting the pot.

"To be honest, I'm desperately investigating something right now. I'm not sure whether that thing will be helpful either. But I plan on gathering everything I can first."

Harutora shrugged his shoulders, looking at the sapling's fruit with a hopeful look. The current Harutora resembled an immature boy befitting his age. Sen quietly looked at his good friend from long ago.

He slowly spoke.

"Harutora-dono, could it be that the Taizan Fukun Ritual failed?"

Harutora was taken aback, showing a stunned expression. "How[59]?" He asked back. Sen laughed out loud, saying with a bantering tone:

"She's here right now."

Eh. Harutora was speechless. Then,

The huge sound of thunder came from the north of the mountain. Harutora noticed that 'presence'. His right eye widened. He gasped and opened his mouth.

"Wha! That was lightning magic just now? Also - isn't that draconic aura!? Why is she here - ah. Yasuzumi's divining--!"

Harutora immediately panicked, unconceivable restlessness on his face. He reflexively turned in the direction of the courtyard, clenching his teeth.

Sen carefully observed Harutora. He eliminated any extraneous worry from his tone and spoke.

"Hiyakuroubou is there too - that guy's moving around however he wants right now. I'm not sure about the details."

"......?!"

Harutora turned around, carrying the potted sapling.

"You're not going to go meet them?"

"There's a reason!"

"I see... In that case... Would you meet someone else?"

"Eh?"

Harutora stopped and looked back. Old Man Sen smiled with an unreadable expression, looking at Harutora.

A momentary silence fell over them.

Harutora shook his head.

"Sorry, Sen-san, I don't have time to chat with you anymore."

"I see. Then, that's enough, go ahead."

The momentary stiffness was released. Sen spoke with his original tone. That steady attitude made Harutora's feelings choke up again.

He might not be able to see Sen again. ...No, perhaps this would be their final farewell. Harutora bit his lip. He forced himself with his willpower to smile cheerfully.

"Sen-san, thank you so much. I'll play a board with you next time[60]."

"You still haven't had enough, huh. Harutora-dono, may everything go well for you."

Harutora flipped the Raven's Wing, flying to the courtyard while holding the potted sapling. He flew into the still-ongoing magic battle, issuing an order.

"Hishamaru! Kakugyouki! We're retreating!"

Part 3

Natsume passed over the high cedar treetops, constantly sprinting upwards with all her might. Her beautiful black hair extended behind her, the pink ribbon fluttering in the wind. Even though her breathing was extremely erratic, Natsume didn't stop even for a bit.

Natsume currently had the Tsuchimikado family's guardian beast - the spiritual beast Hokuto - in her body. Her current ability that was similar to flight was actually the manifestation of the dragon Hokuto's ability. The draconic aura that overflowed from inside her body complied with Natsume's will, pushing Natsume's body forward step by step.

But she couldn't keep up her current state for long.

In the first place, it was quite a dangerous thing for a living spirit to use the strength of the spiritual entity possessing their body, even if a magic sealing any direct interaction was cast on them. The more they used the strength of the spiritual entity, the more dangerous the human portion of the living spirit would become.

Moreover, Natsume's situation was even more severe. The strength of Hokuto possessing her body was almost all used to maintain 'Natsume's existence'. The spiritual power she used by releasing the first seal was actually misappropriated strength that had originally been used to maintain 'Natsume's existence'. In other words, Natsume was putting herself in danger when she controlled Hokuto's spiritual power.

...It's fine. It's alright. If it's just to the mountaintop--!

Natsume tread on air, running vigorously to the mountain top along with a gust of wind.

She ran to where her childhood friend was.

...Harutora.....!

There were too many things she wanted to ask.

There were also countless things she wanted to say.

Why - why did you deliberately summon me back to the human world and then abandon me? Why did you leave me with Yasuzumi but hide yourself in the darkness? Why didn't you even come see me a single time - or even contact me once?

Also, what exactly was the current Harutora doing? What kind of goal did he have to rebel against the Onmyou Agency? What exactly was Harutora preparing to do? He had strayed far away from his life until that point and left his friends, even abandoning Natsume.

Could it be--

Could it be that Harutora had truly become Yakou already?

That Tsuchimikado Harutora no longer existed at all?

She couldn't even finish what she wanted to ask and what she wanted to say in an entire night. Her doubts and anger, her sadness and fear, spilled over uncontrollably from her chest.

But no matter what--

She wanted to see him.

She wanted to see his face.

She wanted to hear his voice.

She wanted to feel his presence.

Natsume cut through the sky with no regard for her own condition, advancing towards the mountaintop.

Then, she finally saw the roof of the gathering hall amidst the mountain forest. Just then,

"Om bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Her gaze dropped. The Unmoving Golden Chains that was unleashed from the mountain forest completely bound the careless Natsume.

"What!?"

Natsume lost her balance, dropping from the sky. Natsume increased the output of draconic aura, forcefully tearing apart the Golden Chains and landing on the ground.

In front of Natsume's anger-filled glare stood a practitioner.

"...Hoh."

Yamashiro snorted fiercely.

"I thought you were using some technique..... It looks like you just let the Tsuchimikado family dragon possess you, huh? What an incredible strength. I never thought you were a dragon living spirit."

"......Please move aside."

"And if I refuse?"

Natsume's right arm shot out. Lightning arced towards Yamashiro with a flash. But the 'lightning-repelling' magic that Yamashiro had cast was still effective. The lightning strike avoided Yamashiro, instantly tearing into a cedar tree next to him.

Moreover, this lightning strike of Natsume's had only charred the tree. She inadvertently felt a bit regretful. It was very obvious that her power had clearly lowered.

"What? I finally managed to catch up to you, but you're out of spiritual power?"

Yamashiro spoke and unleashed Unmoving Golden Chains again without chanting an incantation or forming a hand seal. Natsume released a lightning

strike to obliterate the Golden Chains, but the moment she released that lightning strike, her vision went black.

A chill assaulted her. She could feel the cold presence of 'death' inside her skin.

Hokuto inside her body was sending her an acute warning. She was already at her limits. If this went on, problems would appear in the magic Harutora had cast. Natsume's soul that was merged with Hokuto would leave her body again and become a true wandering soul.

Even so, Natsume didn't activate the seal again.

"Don't... get... in... my... way..."

Even though groans of pain came from her mouth, Natsume still attacked with raking strikes of lightning. Lightning crisscrossed everywhere, flashing with light and heat and burning the bark of the nearby trees into ash.

At the same time, Natsume tried to rapidly circle past Yamashiro. Her charging figure was filled with the draconic aura that represented Natsume's life as she reached the astonishing speed that a living spirit had.

But,

"Order."

Yamashiro dropped an extremely ordinary wood-element charm. But the vines that the charm formed bound Natsume as she pulled lightning with her, then continued by binding Natsume's hands and feet in a flash.

Natsume fell on the ground, sliding along the slope. Natsume immediately released lightning and incinerated the vines.

But when the vines were incinerated, Yamashiro's fingers had already taken up another wood-element charm. It was this relaxed, sow-paced strategy again.

Then, finally,

.....Ah.

Her consciousness started to become fuzzy. Natsume lost hold of her consciousness. It was because the lightning strikes from before had already surpassed the boundaries her body could tolerate. She felt Hokuto's undisguised panic - then slowly drifted away...

"Re-seal!"[61]

A powerful voice came from the trees, pulling Natsume's life back by a hair's breadth. The seal on Natsume's body closed the draconic aura inside her body again, supporting her life with all its power. The consciousness that had already vanished from Natsume returned to her body again.

It was a male voice belonging to a third party.

A very familiar voice. She had only been away from him for a few days, but strangely, it felt very nostalgic.

"!? Who--"

Just as Yamashiro tried to figure out what exactly had happened,

"You bastard!"

An extremely powerful lightning strike raced towards Yamashiro along with a woman's angry roar. Even though the 'lightning-repelling' magic was still maintained on his body, this lightning strike surpassed the spell's limits and electricity poured towards Yamashiro's body like rain. Even though he wasn't hit directly, Yamashiro was still knocked off the ground and sent flying.

"Shit!?"

Yamashiro put up a barrier in a panic. Natsume twisted her head, looking in the direction of the voice.

A small woman wearing miasma protection clothing appeared from the dark mountain forest. She wore a headband on her forehead and the eyes beneath her

headband were filled with rage as she charged towards Natsume with all her strength.

"Look at what you've done to Natsume! I'll kill youuu!"

Along with that extremely direct declaration of battle, furious lightning strikes shot towards Yamashiro as if to verify that proclamation. Yamashiro reflexively strengthened the barrier and sprinted with all his power to avoid the lightning strikes at the same time. The lightning strikes doggedly chased the escaping Yamashiro, their white light illuminating the surroundings and their roars extremely audible.

Yamashiro's face stiffened when he saw the sudden interferer. That was obvious. This woman was a former exorcist, as well as the former captain of a spiritual disaster purification team. She was a capable person. Even more fearsome was the master of the voice that had re-sealed Natsume. Even though he had raised his voice, he was still enchanted with a powerful stealth magic and his presence - even to Yamashiro - was undetectable. Yamashiro wasn't just wary about the 'lightning-user' in front of him, he was even warier about the practitioner who was constantly hiding his presence.

Grateful and apologetic feelings hovered over Natsume's heart.

But right now, she had to.....

".....Yeah."

Natsume gritted her teeth, running up the mountain again. "Natsume!?" The woman was extremely shocked, but upon seeing Yamashiro about to chase Natsume, she immediately started obstructing Yamashiro with all her strength. Sorry. Natsume thanked them in her heart while heading to the mountain top alone.

Even though she almost fell several times, she still didn't quit running up the slanted mountainside. It wasn't just her spiritual power. Even her physical energy had reached its limits long ago. Even so, she climbed up with her hands and pushed aside weeds. Natsume didn't care if her hands were covered with wounds

as she continued running to her destination. She gasped for breath as she continued running to the gathering hall she saw up above.

Then, when she saw the gathering hall on the other side of the thicket again, Natsume felt the ripples of a magic battle pervading the air and gulped.

Traces of magical energy and residues of aura floated through the air. There was the light of trees as they crackled and burned along with smoke that wafted everywhere.

The gathering hall currently looked like it was about to burn down.

Also, only the foundation was left of the main hall that ought to have been on the other side of it, having completely vanished.

Fallen ajari were everywhere. There were also people staggering and moaning loudly. And people bleeding and slumped on the ground. Wreckage was scattered over the destroyed ground. The wake of a battlefield - those words flashed through her mind. Natsume steeled her heart and turned her head, mustering her energy and treading on the ground again.

She reached the courtyard.

Nothing was left around her.

The destroyed main hall of which only the foundation was left, along with the gathering hall burning on the inside. Fallen people of the monastery were everywhere and the surroundings were filled with agonized wails and groans. The temple was also in a half-destroyed state and the shikyakumon was practically unrecognizable. The giant cedar trees surrounding the courtyard were also fallen everywhere and burning.

Also, on the mountain path in front of her, two Armored Juggernauts knocked over one tree after another, advancing through the mountain path that went through the shikyakumon. They were currently leaving the battlefield. Why? She had no doubt. The battle had already ended.

Natsume glanced around, her hair fluttering.

Then, she inadvertently raised her gaze, looking up towards the eastern sky.

Found you.

Somehow, it was already evening. Ashen clouds still covered the sky like a naturally-formed ceiling as they swept towards the distant hills like waves. The reddish sunset shot beautiful, slanting rays of light through the gaps formed among the clouds.

As she looked along the rays of twilight--

A giant raven flapped its wings in the distant eastern sky.

An Onmyouji wearing a black coat flew east through the air.

She had been left behind by him again, left all alone.

Natsume's tears flowed from her eyes. The hot tears slipped over her dirt-covered cheeks, dropping down.

Natsume crossed her arms over her chest. Her body trembled convulsively all over as tears flowed even more tempestuously.

Then, she breathed deeply and shakily, and in the direction of her departing childhood friend's back,

"BAKATORA--!"

She shouted angrily.

After that, she wept loudly.

Part 4

Maybe she had never run with all her might like this before. Akino fully exerted the leg power of the rabbit living spirit, climbing up the mountain forest in a matter of moments. But her feet became heavy when she approached the center of the monastery. There was still some distance, but magical energy produced from the usage of magic reached her. Also, chaotic yelling. Sounds of destruction. At the same time, though the main hall was covered by the forest and out of sight, the sky nearby was brightly lit. Something was burning.

"......Ugh."

Though she was honestly very scared, she would no longer turn back now. Akino slowed down while hiding herself and carefully climbing the mountain.

It looked like the courtyard had become the central location of the battle. Akino approached bit by bit, hiding in the underbrush and peering across from an extremely close place.

She couldn't help but doubt her own eyes. The gathering hall was burning ferociously. The main hall seemed to have already vanished.

This wouldn't do. She couldn't approach like this. Akino didn't rush directly towards the courtyard, but instead carefully circled around to the interior of a temple in order to keep from being spotted. But come to think of it, half of that temple had already been destroyed. Akino could only suppress her fear and steel her own heart as she faced what had become of the familiar scenery of the place she had been raised in since birth.

But in the end, she was lucky to have circled around to this side. That was why Akino was fortunately able to realize an unanticipated reunion.

"Sen-jiichan!"

"Ohh, Akino. You're alright." Akino's endurance reached its limit as she saw Sen's figure. She ran over and held him, burying her face in his chest while sobbing loudly. There was no helping this because of her fear and sadness. After all, the only world that Akino knew of had been dragged into a vortex of war and lost. Sen continuously, quietly, and gently stroked the still-crying Akino from the side.

Sen kept waiting until Akino's crying stopped.

Then, she brought Akino to the courtyard.

The magic battle had long since ended by that time.

Stunned, she looked at the desolate scene before her. But Akino's gaze moved towards the girl standing blankly in the center of the courtyard rather than the barren monastery scenery.

"Natsume!"

She hastily ran towards Natsume. Natsume's eyes reddened when she saw Akino. She sniffled and lightly called out "......Akino."

"What happened? Are you alright!?"

"Akino. I, I....."

"D-Did you not meet with that Harutora person?"

"......Yeah."

Her face was swollen from crying and grimy all over. Natsume nodded powerlessly.

The ears on Akino's head swayed left and right in embarrassment since she didn't know what to say.

The unimaginable appearance of that awe-inspiring Natsume crying gave Akino quite a large shock.

Although on one hand her conscience felt bad due to the wrong occasion, these straightforward thoughts still came to her.

Beautiful people were still beautiful even when they were crying.

"Natsume."

"Natsume-chan!"

She turned around to look in surprise at those sudden shouts. A man and a woman ran over next to Akino and Sen.

The man had a cloth tied around his head and a scraggly beard growing under his chin. He was a man as strongly built as a wrestler. But he didn't feel intimidating. On the contrary, he gave off a gentle kind of impression. In comparison, the woman was rather small. She wore something like a black jacket and her hair was held up with a headband, exposing her forehead.

Akino reflexively tensed up because they were adults she didn't recognize. But the two of them looked over at Natsume with sincerely worried expressions, so Akino's nervousness was relieved very quickly.

"Uncle. Aunt....."

Natsume said this in a quiet voice. They seemed to be people she knew.

The man approached Natsume, momentarily shooting Akino and Sen a sharp gaze. Then, he motioned slightly, returning his gaze to Natsume while lecturing her in a stern tone.

"That's enough being reckless. You almost died just now."

"......I'm sorry."

"To think you would sneak into this kind of place alone! Do you know how worried we were because you disappeared?"

Natsume repeated "I'm sorry" to the woman's reproachful question. But the woman lost her steam very quickly, regaining her incredibly worried expression.

".....Then, did you meet Harutora?"

Natsume bit her lip and lightly shook her head left and right upon hearing the woman's question. After the woman said "That idiot" in a quiet, indignant voice, she softly held Natsume's shoulders. She knew what had happened without a word being said. It was because they were so close.

"In any case, we'll talk later. There are still three Divine Generals here. Though the Mystical Investigator from before backed off on his own, he might not necessarily give up like that." The man said that while looking around the area with a bitter face. Akino's heartbeat sped up when she heard his words.
".....Natsume, are you leaving?"

"Akino....."

Natsume immediately became unable to reply upon facing the words that unconsciously left Akino's mouth. But she realized from that response. Natsume had said it before. Once things were over, she would leave this place. The woman who held Natsume's shoulders looked back and forth between the two girls with a confused expression. Her eyes moved to meet the gaze of the man next to her. The expressions of the two of them were complex.

Just then,

"Could I bother you for a moment?"

Sen spoke up next to the four of them.

In contrast to Akino who didn't know how to react, Sen said with an attitude just as leisurely as always:

"The two over there seem to have already mapped out a trail off the mountain, but you don't know the newest paths. Though they're slightly dangerous, we can avoid other people that way. What do you two say? If you'd like, allow this old man to lead you all."

☆

Miyoshi, who sat on a fallen tree in the middle of the green, densely-growing forest, opened his eyes that had been closed for a long time.

".....Saw it. Considering the direction he was flying, he was headed to Tokyo, but I can't say for sure off just that."

"What about the Armored Juggernauts? Can you figure out?"

"The magical energy was cut off partway. They probably stopped being active. In that case, they're just simple chunks of metal. I can't do anything."

Miyoshi shrugged and Yuge could only sigh. But they indeed could do nothing. The spirit-seeing ability was, in the end, just the ability to 'see' aura. It wasn't a clairvoyance that allowed one to see into the distance. Rather, the fact that he had been able to trace the aura of Tsuchimikado Harutora as he flew to escape the battlefield so far just now demonstrated the high ability of the 'Divine Eye'.

".....How's the situation in the monastery?"

"It's basically all destroyed. But it seems that there were no deaths. How incredible."

In the end, just like Miyoshi announced, Yuge and the others hadn't involved themselves with the commotion in Seishuku Temple from start to finish. Though they didn't know what would become of the monastery in the future, there wasn't a single thing Yuge and the others could do right now. All that was left was to return to the Onmyou Agency and report what had occurred. Fortunately, since

this was a secret mission, they didn't need to write a proper report for it - if they truly did, it would probably become very thick.

Their mission had finally ended, albeit in a very unexpected fashion. Yuge settled down as she thought over things.

"Ah, come to think about it, what about Tsuchimikado Natsume? Did Yamashiro catch her?"

"Yuge-shi. I never definitively said the one I 'saw' was Tsuchimikado Natsume."

"But the probability is extremely high, right? She even used lightning magic. Since we can't hear the sound of thunder anymore, the battle ended already, right? Since it's Yamashiro, he ought not to have made any mistakes....."

"That's not the case."

Yuge made an "Eh?" sound upon hearing Miyoshi's clear-cut negation, hastily asking back.

"Did Yamashiro lose?"

"Ahh, sorry. I'm not saying that Yamashiro-shi was killed. But it really felt like someone intervened. Honestly, I didn't clearly 'see' Yamashiro's side since my attention was focused on Tsuchimikado Harutora. Though I'm inspecting the monastery right now, it will be hard to find the target if they stealth due to the chaotic state of the aura here.

Miyoshi spoke casually. Though she really wanted to tell him to be a bit serious, at least Miyoshi was continuously doing whatever he could to learn about the current situation. Actually, it was the restless Yuge, who could do nothing but urge Miyoshi on from the side, who was of no use.

"First, since we can't find Yamashiro-shi anymore, let's first go back to meet up with the others and hear about the causes and effects of the situation. In the end, the Onmyou Agency's aid still didn't make it, and at this time we'll only get back

to Tokyo tomorrow no matter which road we take. We'll look for a hotel after we get down from the mountain."

"Wait, Officer. First off, not contacting headquarters is....."

"Yamashiro-kun will do that, right? Finding a place to stay at in this kind of backcountry place is more pressing of a matter than that. Even if we searched with our phones, things like backcountry hotels wouldn't even have a website..... Ah, come to think of it, Yuge-shi, do you know about any local specialties? Honestly, the food we ate in the monastery yesterday was tasteless."

Miyoshi stood up unconcernedly while talking and pulling his phone out from his suit. Then he turned on his web browser, starting to search for hotels.

Yuge's head started hurting again. But even when he was doing something like this, Miyoshi didn't stop searching for Tsuchimikado Natsume's aura for a moment - without a doubt, he did his job thoroughly. Unlike her useless self that could only stand around at the side.

That was also the behavior of a professional. Yuge sighed - then she smiled wryly.

".....I did some investigation before we came here. There's a spa hotel in the neighboring town with a highly acclaimed boar meat stew."

☆

".....Yes.....yes. In the end..... yes. I'm extremely sorry. I'll return to regroup with Officer Miyoshi and Independent Officer Yuge after this and return to Tokyo. I'll make a detailed report then....."

Excuse me. Saying that, Yamashiro turned off his phone. Though he had been patient for a while at the start, he ended up stomping on the ground out of irritation.

"......Damn! This isn't like me....."

The two who had interfered partway through were probably the Tsuchimikado branch family members. Though Tsuchimikado Natsume acting alone from the start was itself very suspicious, their timing had been too late for them to have been hiding in the darkness supporting her from the beginning. It looked like there had been some discord between them. Though if they had been moving together from the start, there would have been means to deal with them as well.

"If I knew this earlier, I definitely would have captured Tsuchimikado Natsume even if I had to force things a little....."

He had been too naive for wanting to keep her unharmed and avoid extraneous effort while capturing her. That naivety was the proof of his youth and of his absolutely insufficient experience. Because he had a little bit of outstanding talent, Yamashiro had very rarely faced a 'difficult situation caused by a problem of ability'. That wasn't egoism, it was the pure truth. Actually, the fact that he had very little experience 'breaking through difficulty' was a problem that even Yamashiro himself couldn't ignore.

How maddening. But by using this disappointment and humiliation as fuel, he could grow even further. Growth that would allow his ability to become even more effective. That was a necessary condition that he needed as a newcomer in order to stand side-by-side with the other Divine Generals in the future.

"......Just watch. Soon, even I'll....."

Yamashiro gripped his phone tightly. Then, he concealed his determination and resolve in his heart, urging himself on with them and beginning to move again.

☆

"......Stop."

The car that chugged along the national road stopped on the shoulder due to that word.

The backseat door opened and a man stepped onto the asphalt road. This was a road that snaked up the surface of a mountain. The surroundings were covered by dense mountain forests, and there were no other cars coming other than the one that had stopped.

The sun was setting and the sky was dyed crimson. But the man faced the direction of dense clouds. The man showed a sharp gaze as he quietly stared into the distant hills.

The driver rolled down the window.

"What's wrong?"

"......It's nothing."

The man replied briefly, but he didn't avert his gaze.

Suddenly, the sound of a phone ringtone sounded in the car. The man sitting in the passenger seat hastily picked up his phone. After he spoke a few fast words, he leaned to the driver's seat without even hanging up the phone.

"It's from the agency building! Tsuchimikado Harutora seems to have escaped from Seishuku Temple already. Apparently, the monastery is destroyed."

The man nodded heavily upon hearing that report.

Then,

"Kokuryuu. You go check the situation first. Dasai and Reisen, you inspect the area. Go see whether you can find the aura of the Raven's Wing. Hou'oubiden, you're on standby."

The three materialized crow tengu flapped their wings and flew high into the twilight sky. They flew into the air while cawing and scattering black feathers.

The man returned to the backseat of the car, closing the door very loudly.

"Drive."

After he briefly said that, he slumped his body into the seat, crossing his arms and closing his eyes as if he were meditating.

The car started up again.

Kogure Zenjirou didn't say a single word after that until they reached Seishuku Temple.

☆

"Yeah. That's right. It ended just now."

The boy reported extremely happily, placing the phone to his ear.

"In the end, Tsuchimikado Harutora ran away. Things returned to the starting point. But I didn't think that guy would use the Armored Juggernauts. And three of them, even. Isn't that beautiful? .....Uh, what? No, there's no helping that. When I got here, he already..... No, no. Your requests are too over-the-top. I only noticed the Onmyou Agency's movements in the afternoon, you know? That's why even if I could catch up..... Ah, no, although I'm not sure whether I can catch up, there was no helping it from the beginning....."

The boy spoke continuously through the phone, but he started spouting excuses partway through.

He was a young boy who looked like he was in elementary school. But the place the boy currently sat wasn't anywhere normal.

He sat on top of a power transmission tower to the north of the North Star Mountain. It was a place about a hundred meters above the ground. Although it

was very far away, he could view the entire regions of the Seishuku Temple. The boy dangled his feet in this kind of place that it was unimaginable for such a young boy to climb up to, a bitter expression emerging on his red-sunglasses-wearing face.

"Anyways, it's already basically over, so I'll return to where you are. I'll tell you about the details after I get back."

Saying this, the boy hung up. He shook his head and muttered while standing up from the tower.

"I never thought that guy would be so long-winded. I really joined up with a troublesome 'master'."

How foolish. The boy frowned.

However,

"Ah well. In the end, it's still worth a look."

After he quietly said this, he jumped off of the tower extremely casually.

☆

".....Does it end here?"

Jougen closed his eyes and bowed his head alone in the depths of the monastery he had been pushed back into by the opponent's shikigami.

Tsuchimikado Harutora's aura had already left the monastery a short while ago. The two defensive shikigami and the Armored Juggernauts were the same. Though the enemies had already withdrawn, he didn't dare say anything like that meant the monastery had won. The ajari who had fought next to him in the battle

had vanished at some point. Though they shouldn't have died, he couldn't believe that they were safe and sound.

"What a complete defeat."

He had to admit that point. It was still an extremely vivid reality.

Even though he had taken the initiative to destroy the main hall in order to attempt resistance, he had ended up with nothing at all. All he had accomplished was turning the monastery into ruins.

Seishuku Temple had been destroyed. Though maybe it would have been destroyed if he hadn't done anything, he had given it the final blow because of his inexpediency.

What exactly had he lived in this world for up until now? What exactly had he studied every day and resolutely accumulated harsh training for up to this point? But he could no longer even find the answer. His incompetence had led to this. What could he do other than accept it resignedly?

Jougen smiled slightly, reaching into his clothing and taking out a knife he had carried. This wasn't a magical tool.

Rather, it was an ordinary knife that could be seen anywhere.

He threw down the sheath and bared the blade. Jougen gripped the handle of the knife as if forming a seal. He pointed the knife at himself, closed his eyes, raised his chin, and exposed his throat.

"...Namu."

After briefly chanting that, he stabbed himself without the slightest hesitation.

But,

"...Ugh!?"

In the next moment, he opened his eyes in shock. His hands couldn't move. It was Unmoving Golden Chains. Immediately afterwards, a crunching sound rose from behind him. Jougen stayed in his petrified state, only able to turn his eyeballs in the direction of that noise.

Then, his eyes widened.

"......Rian."

"You did all of this however you pleased, but in the end you just want to commit suicide on your own? Don't be ridiculous! Do you think I'll accept that?"

Rian showed up with his hair a mess and his breathing erratic, and he himself was already taxed to his limits. But a light still burned in his eyes as he stared only at Jougen.

"Even if Seishuku Temple has been routed, that doesn't mean the people of the monastery will vanish. I definitely won't permit such an irresponsible action as abandoning them. Jougen. It's too early for you to die!"

Rian's body shook out of anger - as well as from something else - as he asserted resolutely.

This moment was the first time Rian had overwhelmed Jougen. Jougen bit his lip, the knife still held and waiting. A tear trickled from the corner of the old monk's eye.

Part 5

The path Sen led them to was a small mountain path that had only appeared recently and that no one outside the monastery knew about. Behind Sen followed Akino, who had concealed her ears, along with Natsume and the woman who had named herself as Chizuru. Bringing up the rear was Chizuru's husband Takahiro.

It seemed that the married pair Takahiro and Chizuru were of the Tsuchimikado branch family. Though it had been a different time, it seemed that they were still working for the main family. Indeed, it was as much a historical, legitimate, traditional family as was rumored. Sen couldn't help but smile inside as his old friend surfaced in his mind.

At any rate, these two seemed to have taken up the role of protecting Natsume. Sen slowly understood the overall situation upon hearing the arguments between the three of them. In any case, the Tsuchimikado main family head had foreseen that Harutora would visit the mountain through divination. So, Natsume and Takahiro who had learned of that foresight had silently come to Seishuku Temple by themselves. It looked like she was quite a resourceful girl. At the same time, he discerned that Harutora was wary of something.

The sky was already completely black when their group finally reached the foot of the mountain.

The gray clouds covering the sky had also vanished and the moon that showed its face illuminated the surroundings. Takahiro and Chizuru thanked Sen again and Sen accepted it with a laugh. On the other hand, the faces of the two girls hadn't improved a bit. They hadn't said anything while descending the mountain, and they seemed like they still weren't planning on looking at each other right now.

Sen secretly smiled at their innocent friendship.

Then, he suddenly opened his mouth to speak.

"Takahiro-dono, Chizuru-dono, although this is my personal request - if possible, could you take Akino back with you?"

"...Sen-jiichan!?"

Akino turned to look at Sen, dumbfounded. Natsume's eyes also widened and she stared over intently.

Takahiro and Chizuru suddenly couldn't hide their confusion. Even so, they weren't as flustered as the children.

"......Although I'm extremely sorry, we cannot."

Takahiro bowed respectfully as he spoke.

"We're continuing to live a fugitive life in order to escape the Onmyou Agency's eyes and ears. Also, we're wanted. Natsume's a family member, so there's no helping it, but as for taking in and placing someone underage in that position....."

"Oh? Takahiro-dono, you definitely know about the circumstances of the dark temple. The dark temple's the same with regard to standing in an unlawful position and for taking in underage people. No, the monastery seems completely destroyed now, so it's not even the same, it's greatly worse. Living with the Tsuchimikado family would be better for Akino."

"No, no, but....."

Takahiro lost his words, his expression weakening. Chizuru also puzzled over what to say, and Natsume and Akino stared at each other. The two girls motionlessly watched the situation unfold with appearances of not even knowing whether to interject.

Sen smiled in satisfaction.

"There's no helping it - hey, Hiyakuroubou."

He called out towards the forest, and suddenly, the tengu mask-wearing Hiyakuroubou appeared. As expected of Takahiro, he seemed to have noticed beforehand, but Chizuru and Natsume were momentarily taken aback, while Akino joyfully called out "Tengu-san!"

Hiyakuroubou neatened its clothing and pulled out a piece of paper according to its master's orders. It was a contract. Sen accepted that contract, then smiled proudly, giving it to Takahiro.

"This is the brief contract that I received when I won a hundred games of shogi[62] many years ago. Though I'm very sorry for bringing it out when the man himself isn't around, I'm not sure how long I'll have left to use it if I don't use it now."

Takahiro took the contract, his face twitching as he turned to look at the old man. Chizuru, who peered in from the side, also couldn't help but show a bitter smile.

On the contract was written--

'The Tsuchimikado family will fulfill the request of Seishuku Temple's Sen no matter what. Tsuchimikado Yakou.'

"T-This, but....."

"What?"

"E-Even if you say that, it's....."

"Oh? Even though leadership has been passed down, this is indeed the contract of the Tsuchimikado family heir. Could it be that the proper Tsuchimikado family might break a contract?"

Sen spoke unconcernedly with a bright smile, but Takahiro wore a displeased expression as if he had eaten a bitter bug.

"Sen-jiichan."

Finally, she felt like the adults were deciding what to do. Akino trembled slightly on the sidelines while speaking up.

A complex mixture of anxiety and anticipation was on that face. Her face was currently wearing an expression that said she was going to leave the nest - it was an expression Sen liked.

"Akino. It's time for you to leave the nest too. .....To be honest, we've lived together for a long time..... Well, there's no helping it."

"How can I? Because if I..... leave the mountain, then--"

"No."

Sen smiled but spoke clearly. "Sen-jiichan." Sen stared as if somewhat taken aback.

"That won't do. Akino. The nest has already burned down and you can no longer return. You have to go. The time for you to leave cannot wait any longer."

"B-But."

"What, I won't die for now either. You should go see the outside world. Listen to me this time."

"Sen-jiichan....."

Akino could no longer say any other words.

That child probably hadn't resolved herself at all. Right now she was just confused about the sudden situation.

But next to the timid Akino was a friend who encouraged her. Moreover, she was a friend she had formed a firm bond with. Sen could rest easy. Akino had to depart now. Only Sen could clearly see the fate that the heavens had deliberately woven.

In the end, Chizuru was the one who made her decision first.

The continually-silent Chizuru wrinkled her brow with an "Ughhhh", then -

"...Akino-chan? Are you really okay with this?"

"Hey, hey, Chizuru?"

"Quiet. ...So, Akino? I want to properly hear your reply."

"I-I....."

Akino, driven forward by Sen, looked at Sen and then at Natsume, as if looking for support. After a moment's hesitation, Natsume nodded slightly. Sen silently

praised Natsume in his heart. She was very composed, and had a good nature. She wouldn't stand still when the time to seize her fate came.

After Akino looked at Natsume nodding, she nodded in response as her body shook.

"I want to go."

She told Chizuru her thoughts.

Chizuru's face broke out into an amicable smile. On the other hand, Takahiro still seemed unconvinced. Though he saw more realistic problems, all he could do now was accept it. It seemed that just like before, the Tsuchimikado family women were more imposing than the men.

Sen decided to release the final magic.

"Takahiro-dono, Akino has distant relatives in Tokyo. They're also a traditional family related to magic for generations. If convenient, please try to see them."

"Eh!? S-Sen-jiichan, is that true!?"

Akino stared at Sen in shock. On the other hand, Takahiro visibly sighed slightly. Though his conscience couldn't stomach dragging a child like Akino into a fugitive life, Seishuku Temple looked quite dismal now, even if only its appearance had been ruined. In comparison, finding her relatives, convincing them, and entrusting Akino into their care might be what Akino hoped for.

"What's wrong, Akino, did you think the thing about your relatives was a complete lie?"

"It's because....."

"Look, I told you their name before. Why don't you tell Takahiro-dono?"

"Ah, well, that....."

Though Sen urged her on, Akino stammered for a while. Family names weren't used in the monastery. Because she had never had the opportunity to state her family name, Akino seemed to be unable to think of it for a while.

After Akino furrowed her brows and pondered fiercely,

"Ah, 'Ouma'."

Sen couldn't help but laugh.

"It's not 'O', it's 'So'."

"......Oh, it is? Sorry. No one's heard my family name for a long time."

Akino explained, embarrassed. On the other hand, Takahiro's faded interest flared up again and his face stiffened. Chizuru looked over in surprise, noticing her husband's change. Natsume still hadn't realized.

"Akino, please introduce yourself properly."

Sen - like a mischievous little monk - smiled while indifferently urging Akino forward. Akino adjusted her posture with a nervous face, deeply bowing to Takahiro and Chizuru.

"I-I-I'm Souma Akino. Um, well, p-please t-take care of me.....!"

Sen released the magic and instantly bound the three Tsuchimikados.

Sen looked at the three Tsuchimikados and then thought for a while.

Yakou-sama - Harutora-sama, did you always know that this would happen today? He couldn't imagine getting the upper hand over that genius in anything other than shogi. Maybe he could try for longevity.

Sen looked up at the sky in a joyous mood.

The white moon showed itself in the night sky as it quietly shone down on Sen and the others.